ヘヴィオブジェクト

鎌池和馬

KAZUMA KAMACHI

イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン／

凪良

NAGRYO

Girls' fight at Avalanche in 10,000m

北欧禁猟区シンデレラストーリー

電撃文庫

Heavy Object - Volume 13
Northern Restricted Zone Cinderella Story
— *Girl's Fight At An Altitude Of 10,000m*

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Girls' Fight at the Shooter Per 10,000
北欧禁猟区シンデレラストーリー
PMCairforceSKYBLUE.inc
CLEAR SNIPE
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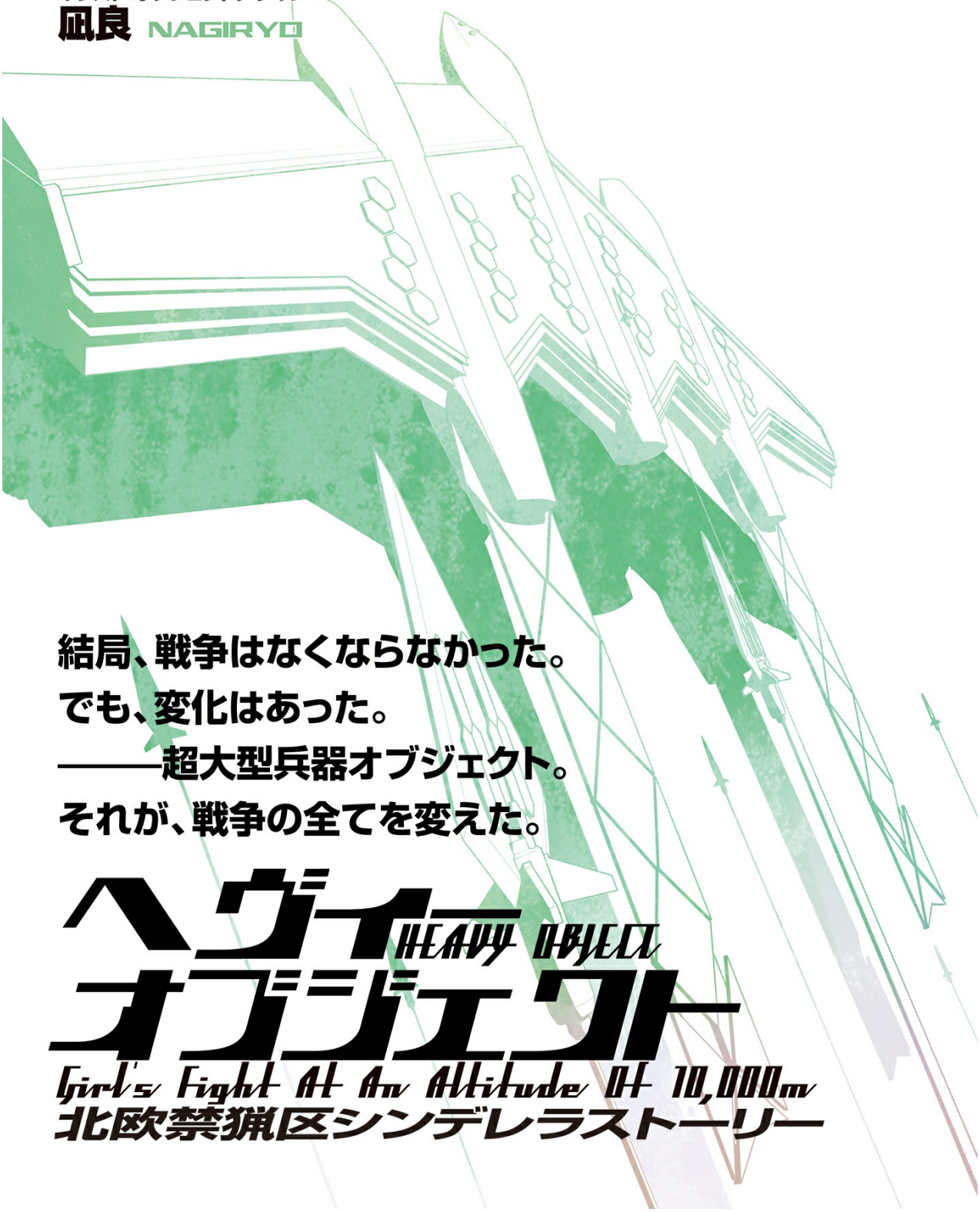
凪良 NAGIRYO



結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT

Girl's Fight At An Altitude Of 10,000m
北欧禁猟区シンデレラストーリー

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【レーヴァテイン】Lævateinn

『正統王国』軍の戦闘列車。

全長520メートルにもわたる鋼の装甲と動力機関の塊で、空対地ミサイルを何発被弾しても動きを止めない強硬さをほこる。

その巨体は破壊工作により脱線して立ち往生してなお、大火力で『資本企業』の戦線を三週間以上押し返し続けている。

本来、オブジェクトの時代となった現代では不要の長物だが、オブジェクトの往来が禁止されている北欧禁猟区にあっては、火力と装甲を備えた圧倒的戦力である。

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 inc.)

HEAVYOBJECT
CLEAR&SNIPE
PMCairforceSKYBLUE.inc
name/Mariydi=Whitewitch
sex/female
place of birth/unknown
age/12
height/1.42m
weight/37.0kg
body size/74.53.72(cm)
hair color/blond
eye color/brown
belong/PMC airforce SKYBLUE.inc
post/pilot

HEAVYOBJECT
ナンシー＝ジョリーロジャー
「はひい待って待って待って待って待ってください！！」
マリーディーホワイトウィッチ
「デッダメだってばよ！」

戦争の生き証人っつったって
他にも色々いるだろ。
何もマリーディ＝ホワイトウィッチに
触れるこたねえさ、なっ、なっ!?

――とあるパパラッチからの忠告

HEAVY OBJECT

Girl's Fight At 1m Altitude Of 10,000m

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
北欧禁猟区シンデレラストーリー

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prelude

Hey, Sewax, let's talk about muscles today.

Now, now. Don't look so shocked. You're the one who brought it up.

Now, muscles come in all sorts of varieties. Think of it like the difference between an American football player and a figure skater. They both have body fat percentages in the incredible single digits, but their body types are completely different, right?

It's obvious when you think about it, but what you demand of your body puts different burdens on it and changes which areas are built up. Baseball, soccer, volleyball, and basketball are all different.

I used to be a paparazzo too, so I chased down all sorts of people on my custom motorcycle back in my day. Everyone from corrupt cops to Hollywood celebs trying to sneak a date. I've seen professionals from every industry imaginable: athletes, soldiers, stage actors, and more.

And that's why she scares me.

That young lady only accepted an interview once when she was in a good mood, but I still don't understand it. Um, is it a part of the…survivability research for pilots? Whatever it's called, she's just as abnormal as those Pilot Elites. No, there's something about her that's different from even the "normal" Elites. Those military secrets scare me. I mean, what kind of environment would stress the human body in a way that makes something like that? It's enough to make me wonder if she's actually a little grey wearing a little girl's skin.

And I suppose the answer to my question is the Northern Restricted Zone.

That's a true battlefield beyond anything you could imagine from the peace-dulled safe countries or battlefield countries.

…So before you remove the lens cap from that shiny work equipment of yours, you really need to ask yourself if you really want to do this, partner. She is truly dangerous. Just try ruining her precious day by catching some surprise photos of her when she spends her rare time off licking some gelato with her tiny tongue. Who knows how she'll repay you for that one.

There are plenty of other living witnesses to war.

There’s no reason to go for Mariydi Whitewitch, right? Right!?

Ah, wait, you idiot! …The damn fool.

Track 01: Welcome Fallen Baby

"…ce Girl 1… Repeat, Ice Horse 3 to Ice Girl 1! Commander!! Get your hand back on the stick right this instant, you rock addict!!"

Her vision was pure white. Eyes open or closed, that remained the same and a piercing pain ran through her temples. Mariydi Whitewitch felt like she was staring directly into a car's headlights. She felt dizzy and badly nauseous, but her pride as a fighter pilot held the acidic mass down in her throat. Her fingertips would not stop trembling and she could not wipe away the beads of sweat that dripped from her forehead to her eyelids.

The deep tones of hard rock blasted around her.

It was all due to that laser light. Her fighter was meaninglessly rolling like a screw.

She was a young girl of only 12. She had long, flowing blonde hair and a body too small to be called adolescent. Just like a racehorse jockey, a fighter pilot was one of the few jobs in the military where a small height and weight were preferred, but anyone who saw this ace would wonder if they really had to shrink their pilots down this far.

She wore a skintight yellow special suit that showed off her undeveloped bodylines and she did not wear an oxygen mask over her nose and mouth like a normal pilot. Her strange outfit likely fulfilled the requirements for assisting with the research and development of the Pilot Elites of the nuke-resistant colossal weapons known as Objects.

The inertial Gs of a fighter were more powerful the more weight one had, so the military actually welcomed smaller pilots because they could endure higher Gs. That said, she was far too small. She could never have endured it without the experimental bodily development techniques from the survivability research meant for use in developing the Object Pilot Elites.

(Damn…it. My eyes…)

She pushed back the dizzying headache and focused on the storm of buzzers filling the cockpit.

(It's more than just laser light. Just as I thought a strange centrifugal force was

gathering the blood in my head, a spasm must have hit my arms and knocked them into a bunch of levers and switches. I don't remember activating any of these buzzers!)

She finally shook free of the light's afterimage. Forcibly grabbing the control column with all these messed-up values in place would only increase the risk of a stall, so Mariydi started by flicking the input devices back to their normal settings. There were nearly 100 of them lined up like an editing studio's mixing board, but she made sure to complete all that before grabbing the control column.

Even with all that, it only took her a few dozen seconds, but a single second meant hundreds of meters in a fighter. She had only looked away for a bit, but a glance at the radar showed the 3 other members of her squadron were quite far away. Even a low estimate said she was more than 50 kilometers away. She had clearly flown out of the mission airspace (MA) and one of the "correct" buzzers led her to look out through the clear canopy. She found half her right wing missing and a trail of black smoke behind her.

"Damn! Did those stupid settings activate the afterburner!?"

"Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. We'd love to assist, but you're in range of that Thor's Hammer. We can't get in through that ocean of light!!"

She could not recover.

The area below was effectively controlled by the enemy Information Alliance.

She somehow managed to escape her tailspin, but she doubted she could make it back to the airbase (AB).

Abandoning the fighter and bailing out was her only option, but that descent would take her to a hell with enemy soldiers in every direction.

"Ice Girl 1 to Ice Sword 2. You take over command. And can I trust the dots on my radar? Ice Burn 4, are your eyes okay? I'm not letting you use this to retire!"

"…Dammit, we knew this was here. If we'd focused on the display and alarm, no one would've been caught by it!!"

When she heard that tearful complaint of a young man more than 10 years her senior, Mariydi clicked her tongue because her colleague could not even make the bare minimum of a report. But there was a slight smile in her eyes.

The high-precision surface-to-air missile (SAM) network known as the Thor's Hammer had stolen the skies of the final special zone. That grim reaper was also

known by the contradictory name of the “sky landmine”. It launched more than 30 missiles at once, blinded all residents of the sky from outside their effective field of vision, and then took a variety or routes to cut off its targets’ escape and slaughter them like a predator’s maw. It induced blindness, headaches, and various sensor malfunctions using the planetarium-like disturbance armament attached to the missile head. Basically, it was a high power version of the prank where people used laser pointers to blind pilots. Their sharp guidance was enough of a problem, but these missiles specialized in slowing the enemy’s reactions before hitting them.

They had been informed of its presence in advance, but there had been an error in the deployment location displayed on the radar. Ice Burn 4 had been blinded by the disturbance lasers because he had looked back in fear first. They had been surrounded and a few of the missiles had been impossible to dodge. Mariydi had been in position to cover for the others, so she had scattered all of her regular gun’s bullets toward the missiles targeting her colleagues and shot them down with what seemed like divine skill. However, focusing her eyes on them and getting so close had come back to bite her.

The current state was the result.

She had moved within the effective destructive range and one of the missiles she had blown up had damaged her main wing. She may have been lucky the entire fighter did not break apart in midair, but it was not over yet.

It had only taken a few dozen seconds for Mariydi to fight the nearly 100 switches and levers her spasm had knocked out of place, return the settings to normal after the laser attack, and slowly grab the control column again, but her fighter had continued forward all the while. Thanks to that, she had moved deep into the minefield.

And once it was ready to fire, the Thor’s Hammer would attack once more. They were fine with firing 30 missiles costing 20,000 dollars each to shoot down a single fighter. And with the way the missiles pursued the fighter, they might damage the pilot’s cornea. That experimental weapon had terrible cost performance, but it would once more launch its violent lights into the heavens like a floor of evil light rising from all across the green-covered earth, precipitous mountains, half-crumbled elevated highway weaving among those mountains, and jagged fjords that surrounded it all.

She barely had control and she could not have dodged them all even if she did.

Mariydi bit her lip in humiliation, taped a thin flash memory music player to her belly, slowly sighed, and then made a report.

“Ice Girl 1 to all. I’m bailing out.”

“Ice Horse 3. Understood. We’ll be right back with the cavalry to search for you, so don’t you die down there, commander.”

She used both hands to grab the large lever between her legs.

The last words she heard resonated in her heart more than the hard rock she so loved.

“Welcome to the Northern Restricted Zone, Ice Girl 1.”

When she yanked on the lever, explosives blew away the canopy’s joints, allowing it to be blown backwards. Right after Mariydi’s small body was ejected upwards along with her seat, the SAMs approaching from seemingly every angle tore into the fighter.

Even so, letting the standard sensor open the parachute was a mistake.

The double structure of silk opened too close to the blast and countless shards sharper than razor blades shredded the parachute.

Track 02: Blind Gunner

What an awful morning.

Even in an Elite-class special suit designed for all weather conditions and environments, Mariydi felt a powerful chill gradually permeating her body. Her skin a mixture of ash and milky white, she had been saved, but she could not be optimistic. These days, any old infantry would have portable microwave radars attached to their guns.

She was in a forest of evergreen conifer trees.

The beautiful blonde girl struggled near the top of a Christmas tree. Needless to say, this was because the holes in her parachute gave her a greater than expected falling speed and the parachute had further tripped her up by catching quite spectacularly on the tree branches. The synthetic fiber cables had also gotten tangled around her entire body, leaving her one step away from having hanged herself.

Times like this inspired the same feeling in any Capitalist Corporations soldier.

(Dammit… I refuse to die before I can get my worker's comp and injury insurance payments!!)

She bent her knee, drew a military knife from a sheath wrapped around her ankle, and cut through the harness and cables. After a full 3 minutes, Mariydi was finally free of her foolish lonely SM session, but then she entered freefall from a height of 5 meters. And while she held a sharp knife in one hand.

(You can't be serious!)

She quickly tossed the knife aside and landed on all fours like a cat. She had apparently avoided a worst case scenario where she shattered an ankle or gutted herself with the knife.

After wiping away what might have been sweat and might have been fog from her brow, she found her knife within the underbrush and sighed. She had really drawn the short end of the stick on this one. The Zig-27 was a powerful fighter with twin engines and she loved the way its vibrations passed through her entire body, but hers had been blown to smithereens and scattered across the area

effectively controlled by the Information Alliance military. The other members of her squadron had been reassuring, but they would have a hard time putting together a recovery operation using a helicopter or tiltrotor with that Thor's Hammer keeping an eye on the area. Of course, hiking back to the AB through the thick forest and across multiple mountains was out of the question. She was surrounded by enemies here. And she was wearing a special suit colored an insane lemon yellow. She would undoubtedly be spotted before crossing the mountains and then worn down by pure numbers.

"Ice Sword 2 to CT! We don't need to refuel! We can keep flying!! More importantly, send out the pumpkin carriage!!"

"You just want us to head back? To hell with that! We sent you the coordinates!! And this all happened because the deployment intel those of you on ground duty were so confident in turned out to be wrong!!"

"Uuh, uuuuuuuuuuuhhhh! Leader!!"

When she set her small radio to receive-only mode, she found those idiots were going on strike in the middle of a war. They had disobeyed the back to base (BtB) order, refused to refuel, and were apparently circling just out of range of the Thor's Hammer.

"CT to Ice Girl 1! It's hopeless. We don't know how to scold these problem children!!"

Mariydi held a small hand to her forehead, but she could not just respond. If she sent a signal out from the silent forest, a specialized communications soldier with a large radio on their back might determine her location. She did not know how things worked in the clean wars that had been thoroughly poisoned by peace, but that would be throwing her life away here in the Northern Restricted Zone.

What she had to do was simple.

(That Thor's Hammer has its loathsome missiles deployed all over the Northern Restricted Zone, but the real problem is the high-precision radar, not the missile containers. It's disguised as a large truck or school bus to make it mobile. It's too expensive to buy enough to cover the entire area, so it heads to the different deployment areas when it receives a request.)

Even if a million SAMs covered every meter of the Northern Restricted Zone, only the ones connected to the high-precision radar could lock onto and target a fighter. No matter how many missiles they had, the Thor's Hammer's anti-air network would fail without the radar.

So if Mariydi could travel through the foggy forest, find the disguised mobile high-precision radar, and destroy it, the sky would be safe even if it could still blind them to an extent. Then the pickup helicopter could fly freely overhead and those idiots with nothing better to do could respond to her requests and slaughter the approaching ground units with their explosives and machineguns.

She did not know how many disguised radars there were across the entire Northern Restricted Zone, but it would take quite a bit of time for any radars in other areas to arrive here. She could enjoy a nice leisurely flight back to the base before the weapon system recovered.

Also, the Information Alliance and their Thor's Hammer were not necessarily the only enemy.

The Northern Restricted Zone was the only place on earth where Objects were forbidden, so it was a special land with its own unique form of battlefield. It had become a quagmire between the four world powers – the Capitalist Corporations, Information Alliance, Legitimacy Kingdom, and Faith Organization – so there could always be hunters who had crossed the border into another world power's effective territory.

The one ironclad rule for any fallen pilot was to assume that the entire world was their enemy.

(Even if I'm being optimistic, I probably don't have even 6 hours. Even the biggest morons should be able to fully surround a fallen POW by then.)

Of course, the mobile high-precision radar disguised as a large truck or school bus was crucial for the Information Alliance and their Thor's Hammer. It would be strictly guarded. Mariydi checked on her equipment while imagining the scale of the enemy here. She had her bright lemon yellow special suit, a single military knife, a single self-defense handgun, and a longish magazine holding 24 9mm rounds. She also had 2 meals' worth of biscuits she had cooked herself, a small radio, and a handheld music player.

"What a pain…"

She placed her hands on her slender hips, swung her head to the side, and sighed. It may have been her insufficient donations and charitable giving that had led god to abandon her, but that was its own issue. Alone and with no hope of backup, the girl had already decided what she needed to do.

(I'm probably about 50 kilometers away, but I'm still fairly close to the border between the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance. In that case, I

should be able to find *one of those*.)

"…That didn't take long."

Mariydi crouched low and viewed something through the fog and trees.

She saw a small log cabin that perfectly matched the conifer forest. It looked like a friend to anyone who wanted a quiet and peaceful life, but…well, it probably was not a villa. A lot of things happened on the national borders of a battlefield: smuggling, black markets, human trafficking, etc. There were always some stupid soldiers who abandoned their mission for some extra income on the side, so money and weapons had a way of gathering in places like that.

Of course, there were normal cities and residents even in the Northern Restricted Zone. But to an expert's trained eye, it was obvious. An amateur's log cabin would not be surrounded by footprints from military boots, it would not have video cameras attached to the surrounding tree branches, and it would not have grenades attached to wire traps coated in a greasy smell to make sure wild animals did not carelessly trigger them.

(This setup looks like the Information Alliance. In that case, there's no need to hold back.)

These soldiers had abandoned their duties to commit war crimes, so there was not actually any need for mercy even if they were fellow Capitalist Corporations soldiers, but she would feel slightly worse about it.

(They should have a ton of weapons with the serial numbers filed off for self defense, so I can borrow a few of those.)

Mariydi approached while still crouched low, but her sharp nose picked up on something odd. She silently investigated and dug up some humus covered in fallen leaves and dried grass.

Someone needed to teach these people the fundamentals.

It was standard practice in the military to never bury something if it had a scent even somewhat reminiscent of a flavor such as sweet or spicy. Wild animals would dig up even a single square of toilet paper with a floral scent.

But it was not a pile of shit buried here.

It was a parent and child wearing bright orange jackets so they would not be mistaken for an animal and shot by a hunter. The child was younger than Mariydi. Based on their equipment, she doubted they were military. They were probably

civilians who had gone out to gather mountain vegetables and happened across this place.

There was no point in reburying them. The animals would just dig them back up.

But Mariydi Whitewitch clenched her teeth and forced an icily deep voice from the depths of her gut.

"…I don't know what idiot did this, but they aren't getting any mercy."

She had an objective in mind, so the blonde girl quickly got to work.

The excessive number of cameras and traps suggested they were too weak to send anyone out on patrol. In that case, no one would spot her lemon yellow special suit as long as she chose her "route" carefully. She had thought falling to the bottom of a valley was unlucky, but that assessment was quickly changing.

"…"

Mariydi pressed against the log cabin's wall and crouched down. She slipped below the windows as she made her way around. The windows seemed to be double-pane for heat insulation, but warmth was still out of place in this Scandinavian forest. The creaking of the glass and fogging of the windows gave a general idea of which rooms had a fire in the fireplace and where the people were gathered.

(It looks like the heater's flame is being kept low, but that last room must have contained an oil heater. However, it had been left on too long, so it would be too hot in there. The people will be with the fireplace.)

It was not as simple as saying any room with heat would have people. A comfortable level of heat mattered most. Even on this never-ending battlefield, people sought comfort and naturally moved to the ideal spot. Human beings could not fight their pleasure signals no matter what they did.

"War is tragedy. Valhalla here is known as the Divided City due to this giant fence cutting across the center from north to south…"

She heard a steady and regulated woman's voice from beyond the double-pane window, but it was likely coming from a television. She classified it separately as she continued thinking.

As the girl snuck along like that, she checked to see which rooms were heated and gathered information on the enemy. And that information went beyond location and number. How often a soldier approached the window could tell her their

general skill level.

(This will be child's play.)

With that estimation, Mariydi returned to the front entrance. The door was made of thick steel and the wall was made of thick logs. She drew her military knife from her ankle and knocked lightly on the door with her back pressed against the wall.

She heard footsteps.

"Who is it?"

And a voice.

The voice was so slack she wanted to hold her head in her hands, but for those working at an illegal business, an unexpected visitor who had not showed up on any of the sensors probably sounded more like a familiar business partner than an enemy attack. She heard something scraping on the other side of the door and a slit window opened, much like on a solitary confinement cell door. But that was not enough to see Mariydi pressing against the wall next to the door.

And she did not hesitate to stab the thick knife through the slit.

There was not even a scream.

She pulled the knife out and stuck the blade between the door and wall to destroy the lock. Thanks to the excess weight pressing out on it, the door silently opened and someone rolled out. It was a man in a camouflage uniform who had been skewered through the eyeball. Mariydi entered the hallway while making sure not to step in the pool of blood.

(One in the first room on the right and three in the last room on the left.)

She still sensed no hostility from the enemy.

She only had to continue on in order.

"…Valhalla expanded rapidly due to the influx of people after the destruction of Asgard, which was known as the City of 5 Million, but even then, they did not chop down the Sacred Forest which has remained a gorgeous piece of Scandinavian culture since before the 10th Century CE. However, their metal…"

As if drawn by the voice on the television, she first fired 2 shots into the room through the first door on the right. That took care of the man in a camouflaged

uniform looking through a pinup magazine with his feet on the table. The loud gunshots triggered hostility from the last room on the left, but Mariydi kept her focus on the entirety of her surroundings. She did not detect the presence or noise of anyone being woken by the commotion. A stockpile relay base for a shady business could not call for reinforcements.

(Nothing out of the ordinary. That leaves three.)

A woman stepped out into the hallway carrying a rifle with a wood stock and got a bullet between the eyes for her trouble. A middle-aged man staggered as he frantically stopped and ducked back into the room, but Mariydi rapped lightly on the nearby wall with her empty hand.

(The inner walls are plywood and only about 2cm thick except for the hollow center for insulation purposes. A 9mm can penetrate that just fine.)

She fired 5 shots into the wall. She intentionally scattered the shots across the wall to supply death to the full surface and not just a single point.

She had received high-intensity training, she had assisted in the survivability research that would be used for the Object Pilot Elites, and she had ample experience on this quagmire of a battlefield, so even if she looked like she would break if you held her too tight, she was a tough killing machine.

She had to confirm the corpse in the other room and kill the remaining soldier.

But if her bullets could penetrate the wall, so could theirs. One of the corpses held an assault rifle. If she simply walked down the hallway to the room, she could easily be filled with lead, so she instead climbed out a random window and walked around the outer wall to the room in question. As a log cabin, the outer walls were of course made from logs. Those could actually stop a rifle bullet.

She used that sturdy cover to approach the window to the proper room.

After their allies had been killed one after another, the last one had not left the room. Whether out of fear or caution, they would be focused on the hallway. Mariydi broke the double-pane window from outside and pressed her handgun against the target’s back.

“Eeek!? Wait, wait, please waaaaiiiit!!”

“?”

She just barely stopped her finger on the trigger.

This was supposedly a stockpile relay base where the Information Alliance's delinquent soldiers had gathered supplies and money for black market deals and the like, but this final person had spoken with the same Capitalist Corporations accent as Mariydi.

She was a girl of about 18.

She had completely fallen onto her butt, she was trembling so much it was a miracle she had not wet herself, and she was tearfully covering her head with her hands. She wore a tight skirt suit best suited for indoor work and intellectual frameless glasses. She had sexy bodylines that suggested an ample diet and long chestnut hair tied back in a large flat braid that looked like a shrimp tail.

(Hmm, which is it? Well, the Information Alliance and Capitalist Corporations probably do deals here, so it isn't that odd to find they've picked up our way of talking.)

The girl had not stopped trembling.

"I-I! Um, I came here to track down and investigate the dangerous elements inside the Capitalist Corporations dealing in weapons and money across the border! I found out the weapons being made 'untraceable' here are being sold to terrorist organizations, so, um, I'm not an Information Alliance soldierrr!! Heh. Eh heh heh. As you can see, I was captur-…"

Mariydi did not hesitate to pull the trigger.

"Eh?"

The mysterious girl was left speechless as the bullet pierced her left upper arm.

"Eh, eh? Byah!? Hot, hot,
hooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooot!
Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

The fried shrimp writhed on the floor in intense pain, but she did not reveal an evil identity by drawing a gun and she did not even rush to stop the bleeding by applying pressure to the wound. In fact, it looked like she was not even aware of that first aid method.

Finally, Mariydi pointed her handgun barrel straight up.

"Oh, so you're actually innocent."

"Ah, hah, pwah! That's what I told you! Your trigger finger is too quick to-…urp.

Ugweeeeeeeehhh!?”

Moaning in pain shook her throat which seemed to stimulate her stomach. Still lying on her back, she turned her head to the side and let it out quite spectacularly. After climbing in through the window, Mariydi grimaced, cut across the room, and lightly kicked the head of the middle-aged man she had shot through the wall earlier to confirm he was dead.

Seeing Mariydi about to head out into the hallway, the glasses fried shrimp frantically spoke up. She seemed to be done fighting the urge to spew, but only because it was all out already.

“W-wait, wait, wait!!”

“What?”

“Why are you just leaving me here!? You shot me!!”

“I have no interest in your life.” Mariydi nonchalantly continued right on by. “I want the many weapons these idiots have here. What happens to you is none of my concern.”

That must have made it clear enough that the small girl really did intend to leave the bloody fried shrimp behind because the mysterious glasses girl truly began to shake. She was also from the Capitalist Corporations, and she seemed to recall how they were supposed to act at times like this.

“I-I can reward you!! …Uuh…”

“How exactly?”

Mariydi called out to her through the wall while looking around the neighboring room. She found a carbine, a spare magazine, and a grenade set. She grinned when she spotted a shoulder-fired rocket launcher and a rocket for it. None of the spare uniforms would fit a 12-year-old girl, but she could not continue wandering around the forest with her lemon yellow special suit exposed. She had no choice but to shred the spare clothes with her knife and put together a makeshift ghillie suit to wear over her head.

And there was still no response from the fried shrimp.

“?”

Puzzled, Mariydi returned to that room carrying the firearms like someone with

an armful of laundry. She found the sexy suit girl beginning to convulse on the floor. Working up the energy to shout had apparently increased the blood flow and hastened her blood loss. Mariydi rubbed her index finger against her temple, sighed, and then pulled some disinfectant and bandages from a first-aid kit she found in the delinquent soldiers' stockpile.

Not bothering to remove the suit, she sliced the sleeve with her knife. When she crudely dumped disinfectant on the gunshot wound, the fried shrimp began arching her back like a shrimp.

"Obh!? Abhah!! Ahah!?"

She had been convulsing from shock due to the pain, but the shock of this new pain had apparently helped her recover. Mariydi took the injured girl's arm, wrapped a bandage somewhat tightly around it, and asked a cold question.

"What is the reward you mentioned?"

"H-huh? What am I-…? I feel like the hands of the clock are moving weirdly…"

"——————"

"Wait, wait, wait, don't leave! Descend upon us, spirit of Nightingaaaaaale!!"

"Reward."

Mariydi seemed cruel when she had been the one to shoot her, but this was just how the Capitalist Corporations was. They taught the following worldview: Q. God, how can I bring about world peace? → A. Make lots of money.

"You can give up on getting money by requesting a worker's comp and injury insurance claim. It'll never go through when your wound is from a Capitalist Corporations gun. They'll suspect you shot yourself for the money."

"No, it isn't that."

"Then what? Should I grab one of the Information Alliance guns and blow another hole in you?"

"Nooo, you savage!!"

After shouting, the fried shrimp's head wobbled.

She frantically worked to hold onto her consciousness.

“Th-the four world powers are locked in constant battle here in the Northern Restricted Zone, so invisible national borders are constantly being drawn and erased like they’re living things. That means log cabins like this one can be found all over. They’ve set up their own network where they use the money earned from smuggling and black market weapons sales to purchase and hide platinum.”

“…”

The fried shrimp’s glasses fogged up as she leaned forward and breathed from her nose.

“And the total amount is estimated to be 50 billion dollars. Pant, pant. That’s enough to purchase a double digit number of *those* Objects. I don’t know where they have all their wealth hidden, but I suspect they have it all in platinum. It has similar traits to glass, so it can be worked into silicon artificial bones and thus I bet it can be hidden inside their bodies. Platinum has a high specific gravity and – more importantly – it’s very valuable, so if each one of them has 1kg of it inside, they only need about 200 people! Well, well!? Interested now? Ah ha ha, eh heh heh!! It’s the Capitalist Corporations dream, so let’s share it togetherrr!!”

Mariydi thought for a moment.

And…

“Tch. She’s hopeless. I should just abandon her.”

“What? Wait, wait, wait, please waaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiit!”

Track 03: Thor's Hammer

Mariydi was pursued by a voice yelling "wait" over and over again.

She clicked her tongue and looked back while wearing a handmade ghillie suit to cover her lemon yellow special suit.

The glasses fried shrimp wore a tight skirt suit that looked terribly out of place deep in a conifer forest and her giant breasts bounced as she tried to catch up. And she was of course breaking branches and stepping in mud all over the place. She was little different from a guide waving a tiny flag at the front of a tour bus.

"A-aren't we both from the Capitalist Corporations where money is everything? Heh, eh heh heh. What don't you like about this? Please protect meee."

"You have zero credibility. If these lowly delinquent soldiers really did have 50 billion dollars, they'd use it to buy their own Object and maintenance base to invest in war. They would have no reason to continue this high-risk illegal business. I'm not digging through corpses for a story like that."

"Uuh…ow, ow, ow, ow, ow…"

"Ahn?"

"Th-the arm, uuh, the arm you shot, uuuh, what am I supposed to dooo…?"

"…"

The fried shrimp turned into one of those frightening young men who act like you broke his arm if you bump into him on the streets, so Mariydi put her hands on her hips and cooled the look in her eyes down to absolute zero.

"I see, I see. So that's it, is it? I suppose you're right. Even if the bone and major blood vessels are fine, you were shot through with a 9mm. I should probably do something about that."

"Eh? Really…?"

"Medical morphine should get rid of the pain. Hey, stick out your arm, fried shrimp, I'll show you a miracle of human pharmaceutics."

"Ah, wait, I don't like the sound of that!! Morphine!? Isn't the stuff that you can never stop using once you start taking it for some relief!? Wait, wait!!"

"This is a portable anesthetic supplied by the military, but there are rumors among the soldiers that if you're injured badly enough to need it, you should probably just ask for a bullet to the head instead. Now, I was at fault here, so I'll be nice and use 3 of them on you."

"Stop, stop, stoooop!! I don't want any help from someone who doesn't read the warning labellll!!"

"Then pack ice or cold water in a bag and hold it to the wounded area. Icing is a standard pain relief method. But if you want the pain to really go away, just ask."

"Aw, aww…"

Mariydi said it in a cruel way, but her instructions were not inaccurate. Filling a plastic bag with water from a nearby river (which would have been pure enough to bottle if not for the corpse floating in it) and holding it above the bandage did a lot to dull the pain.

But even if she had gotten sidetracked by the talk of a reward, that was not Mariydi's main objective. She had to destroy the mobile high-precision radar supporting the Thor's Hammer laser-blinding SAM network, call a recovery transport helicopter before the Information Alliance search team closed in on her, and escape to safety through the sky. That was her top priority. Gathering a mountain of platinum from some delinquent soldiers' artificial bones was meaningless if she was surrounded and killed by enemy soldiers.

"Come to think of it, where did you come from and how did you get here? Do you have a vehicle?"

"I think it's flipped over and burning at the bottom of the valley over there."

"…"

"Ah, that look! You think I'm completely useless, don't you!? I won't forget that, you know!?"

"Well, what *can* you do, fried shrimp?"

"My name isn't fried shrimp! It's Nancy Jolly-Roger!!"

She bent over and stretched her arms downward, which accentuated her already large breasts by squeezing them together from either side. She was apparently

angry. Those seemed to express her emotions much like a dog's tail. Since her face was giving a tearful upturned look, it was hard to tell just from that if she was furious or asking for seconds, so Mariydi made a mental note to focus on the movements of her breasts from now on.

The Thor's Hammer could fire more missiles than there was gum on the pavement. Its high-precision radar was mobile, so it was not deployed to a fixed position. Searching for it could have been difficult, but Mariydi actually had a guess as to where it was.

A mobile high-precision radar might sound like an incredible piece of specialized equipment, but it still used normal electromagnetic waves. Just as a television or radio would have poor reception with mountains in the way, radar waves could be reflected and distorted.

"They don't have enough mobile radars for everything, so they would naturally want to place it in the optimal position to cover as wide an area as possible and allow as many missiles to fire as possible."

"? What are you talking to yourself abooouuut???"

"Did you decide I was talking to myself because you're a moron?"

Without even spreading out the map she had found in the log cabin, Mariydi looked around at the mountains and valleys in the area to figure out where they would have placed the radar. From there, she just had to head straight to those coordinates and blow away the radar to neutralize the Thor's Hammer. That would settle everything.

"Is that it?"

Even in this fog, she could see it clearly from 300 meters away.

It had likely been a mountain farm originally. The forest's trees had been cleared away and short underbrush covered the gentle slope. It looked large enough for a game of soccer if you did not mind the slope, but it currently looked like a trade fair for military trucks loaded with missile containers. All of the trucks were part of Thor's Hammer, so they were loaded with doubly cruel missiles that had high-level guidance and lots of disturbance lasers to blind the pilot. At the center of the missile-equipped vehicles spaced evenly across the area was what looked like a yellow school bus with the top opened like a cake box. A round Doppler radar was located inside.

"A radar disguised so it won't show up on satellites, hm? I've heard they change

what it looks like each time."

"Hmm???"

"I beg you. Please put some effort into speaking human language."

"So how are you supposed to attack that?"

The girl finally asked a decent question.

Unlike the previous log cabin, this area had plenty of Information Alliance personnel and there would be a fair number of soldiers patrolling between the missile vehicles which were stopped in something like a chess board pattern.

Normally thinking, she could never hope to hit the radar from a distance with a shoulder-fired rocket launcher when it was surrounded by the military trucks positioned around it. It had too many shields. It looked like her only option was to sneak onto the chess board and directly place explosives on the radar in the center.

However…

"Including the personnel in charge of operating the trucks' missile containers, there have to be more than 100 people in all," pointed out the fried shrimp named Nancy. "I-I really don't think it will be possible to sneak all the way to the center without anyone spotting you."

Mariydi ignored the question as she put together a rocket for the shoulder-fired launcher. The warhead looked like a thin ruby ball and the two fuel agent cylinders were each about as long as two fists. She attached them all together.

Seeing Mariydi pass the rocket through the launcher tube and lock it in place, glasses Nancy asked a nervous question.

"I-if you fire that, won't it hit one of the 'walls' around it instead of the radar itself…?"

"That doesn't really matter," said Mariydi as she rested the launcher on her shoulder and peered through the scope sight. "This is what happens when you try to link wirelessly in the mountains. The electric instructions get all distorted like they're echoing, so they end up packing in all the vehicles close together. They might as well connect them with cables."

She continued in a singsong voice.

"Besides, look at all those missile containers with those laser-blinding SAMs arranged like a lotus root or a bouquet of flowers. How much explosives and fuel do you think there are in all those?"

With a loud fwoosh of white smoke, nervous and sexy Nancy was knocked back and to the ground behind Mariydi.

Normally, this would only have been powerful enough to transform a black bulletproof car into a pile of scorched scrap.

But the old farm here had plenty of missile container trucks packed together as tight as a full parking lot. It was a lot like an armory contained inside a somewhat sturdy case.

When the armor of the first truck on the outer edge was breached, the chemically-produced 2500-degree explosion burned through the entire interior structure. That meant setting fire to the explosives and fuel inside the 3 rows of 4 missiles inside each container.

When the one truck exploded from within, the patrolling soldiers and the nearby missile trucks were swallowed by the flames. Destruction wrought more destruction. The scarlet flower grew and grew and surpassed any kind of human control in the blink of an eye.

All sound vanished.

The old farm was engulfed in countless fiery explosions that fused into one giant explosion. It was like a volcano had erupted.

Mariydi had tossed the launcher aside and gotten down on the ground after firing and a shockwave passed by overhead one beat later. The underbrush was knocked back, the conifer trees shook, and a stinging pain reached her skin and eardrums. If she had stayed standing, she would have been knocked over, her head would have slammed into the ground, and she might have gotten a concussion.

"K-kyuuuuuhhh…"

Incidentally, the fried shrimp had already tripped on her own, so she was dizzy but not particularly injured.

The mobile high-precision radar supporting the Thor's Hammer had been blown away along with the missile trucks surrounding it.

The Information Alliance was sure to notice an explosion of that size, but it did not matter how large a ground force they sent out. The sky was safe once more, so the Capitalist Corporations could send out fighters and attack helicopters. Of course, the Information Alliance had their own AB, but they would have built their air-defense system under the assumption that they had the Thor's Hammer. If a Capitalist Corporations aerial force rushed in immediately after they lost the foundation of their defense, the Information Alliance would suffer a significant time loss before sending out the order to prepare the runways and scramble their fighters. Their ground forces would be exposed to a nightmarish downpour of lead and explosives.

"Now I can finally get back."

"Hmm."

She heard the somehow brazen sound of thick rotors approaching from the distance. A transport helicopter boldly flying so high looked like a declaration of victory.

"Wah, wah."

"Why are you tearfully putting your hands on your head? They're on our side."

"Hmm?"

"…It scares me that I'm starting to understand you. Look at the body of the helicopter. See the emblem that looks like a crane game arm? That means it's from a Capitalist Corporations recovery unit."

But the transport helicopter did not descend to the surface.

The fried shrimp finally removed her hands from her head.

"They didn't notice us… Oh, no. They're going to leave us. Sh-should we head to a more open area? I'm a bit scared of unexploded ordnance and gasoline, but if we go to that old farm…"

"…"

Mariydi had no real reason to save Nancy, but for some reason, she grabbed the suit girl's sleeve and tugged hard.

The cargo door on the side of the transport helicopter sat open. The gunner peering out from there produced a creaking sound as he turned the heavy machinegun bolted in place there.

A moment later, bullets larger than one's thumb were fired down toward the surface.

Mariydi practically threw herself to the ground while holding Nancy. If they had not rolled down what was more of a small hill than a slope, they would have burst like a red water balloon. And they could not stop moving. They continued rolling down the mountain while practically holding each other in their arms.

They hid in a thicker area of the conifer forest.

The green ceiling would hide them from the sky, but they could not let their guard down. The gunner's heavy machinegun was only bolted to the floor sticking out from the cargo door. If he only had an iron sight, he would not have the benefit of infrared or microwave anti-personnel radar, but a single hit would still mean instant death.

"Wh-why…why is the Capitalist Corporations shooting at uuussss!?"

"…"

Mariydi had no answer to that one. It might be Information Alliance equipment painted to look like the Capitalist Corporations and it might be delinquent soldiers from the Capitalist Corporations who were connected to the log cabin with their own side business. But whatever the case, their lives were being targeted. If they did not want to die, they had to do something about it.

And then…

"Hm, nn?"

Nancy let out an oddly sensual voice. Mariydi heard something vibrating from the inner pocket of Nancy's suit and that was apparently attacking her giant breasts. Nancy pulled out a military handheld device. Despite the circumstances, she stared at the small screen and accepted the transmission, but then she let out a hysteric cry.

"Wah!? Look at this!!"

She held the screen out toward Mariydi.

It was hardly the time since they were being targeted from the sky, but she read what it said:

Message Priority: Emergency (Rk. 5)

Flight Lieutenant Mariydi Whitewitch of PMC Air Force Sky Blue Inc.'s aerial division has been registered as an enemy on suspicion of Class 1 war crimes (intentionally leaking military technology, among others).

In Northern Restricted Zone Airspace D9, the suspect took unnecessary actions which exposed herself to danger and ultimately led to the destruction of her fighter. There is reason to suspect she intentionally had her cutting-edge Zig-27 multirole fighter crash in an enemy nation's effective territory along with the many military secrets it contains.

To discover the details of this issue, we would prefer she is captured alive, but if you determine she has contacted Information Alliance personnel or is attempting to escape, attack at your own discretion.

"What…is this?"

Even calm and collected Mariydi groaned at this one.

She knew nothing of this. She had exposed herself to the Thor's Hammer because it had been necessary to protect her blinded wingmen from the sea of lasers. She would never work with the Information Alliance to send her fighter's wreckage into enemy territory. Besides, calling a fighter "cutting-edge" was nonsense in the age of Objects. Fighters had essentially had the sky stolen from them by the surface-to-air laser (SAL) systems used by those colossal weapons. They were an endangered species that were only any use in the Northern Restricted Zone where Objects were banned. They were a protected weapon. Their only value was their possible ability to assist the development of Objects or Pilot Elites, so there was no real reason to talk them up like this.

But what came next was even stranger.

The previous contradictory statement was only the beginning.

The Northern Restricted Zone Conquering Cartel made up of several Capitalist Corporations companies has decided to post a reward for this suspect.

The total amount offered is 50 billion dollars.

Any who capture the suspect or provide information or actions that lead to her capture will be paid an amount from that total sum relative to the value of their contribution.

Mariydi and Nancy exchanged a glance.

That was a strange sign. They recognized that amount combined with that unit. It

was the same as the platinum supposedly hidden in the artificial bones of the delinquent soldiers wandering across the Northern Restricted Zone.

"50…?"

"…billiooooonnnn???"

The way she said "billiooooonnnn" was really annoying, so Mariydi clenched her fists and rubbed them against the fried shrimp's temples.

Track 04: Money≠Treasure

Thanks to the giant explosion of the laser-blinding SAM setup in the old farm, the mountain slope covered in conifer trees was torn up and covered in metal scrap even more than 500 meters away. Had it been blasted this far by the eruption, or had it slid down the slope? That was unclear, but not all of it had been destroyed equally. Mariydi grabbed a relatively unharmed scrap and pulled it upright.

It was a large military motorcycle colored moss green. It was equipped with a ridiculous engine large enough for city racing, but the suspension was more like one used for off-road motocross. Mariydi could see why these were not sold on the civilian market, and the monster machine was far too large for a 12-year-old girl.

It was more than 3 times her weight, but she easily righted it like she was lifting a barbell and climbed onto the seat. That was when a gentle sensation clung to her from behind.

It had glasses, giant breasts, a tight skirt suit, and a fried shrimp hairdo.

In other words, it was Nancy Jolly-Roger.

“Heh, eh heh heh.”

“Hey.”

“P-please don’t leave me behiiiind!! No matter what you say, I’m never letting go, just like the Island Nation’s Konaki-Jijii!!!!!!”

Mariydi grimaced at the two soft masses squishing up against the back of her head more than her back.

“What do you hope to accomplish by doing this to a girl, fried shrimp?”

“Ohhh, your head is in just the right spot to rest my chin onnn.”

“That’s distracting! Don’t place a three-point lock on my head!!”

Complaining was not going to accomplish anything. Even if the thick fog and the curtain of conifer trees would block their vision, the transport helicopter was still flying around with a heavy machinegun sticking out of its cargo door.

"…Fine, then."

"That's right! When trouble arrives, we're all in this together, aren't we!? Hm, hm, hm, hm!!!!!!"

The fried shrimp got so worked up she began breathing from her nose onto the nape of Mariydi's neck, but Mariydi started the engine regardless. The transmission could apparently be switched between manual and automatic, so she hit the button near the handlebar grip to select manual, skipped straight from first gear to third gear, and began a start dash that made the motorcycle hop up.

There was no road here.

She drove directly down the steep and bumpy slope. There were thick tree trunks all around and everything was wrapped in thick fog. The conditions could hardly be worse.

“You really have strange tastes, you know that?”

“?”

“I was the only one falsely accused, so if you had abandoned me and run off, the chopper’s HMG probably wouldn’t have targeted you.”

“Eh?”

“But when trouble arrives, we’re all in this together, hm? That’s the kind of volunteerism you don’t often see in the Capitalist Corporations, but well, it’s your life. If you want to throw it away, that’s your business.”

“Wait, wait, please waaaaaaiiiiiiiit!? Let me off! Help me! I’m a victim! Pleeeeeeeease!!”

Nancy tearfully waved her arms toward the sky, but she had already made the decision for herself without realizing it. She was now a companion of Wanted Criminal Mariydi, so it was too late.

After they heard some explosions in the sky, tree trunks thicker around than Mariydi or even the fried shrimp’s torso shattered like styrofoam. The logs from the cabin had functioned as a shield against a handgun or assault rifle, but they were far less effective against a heavy machinegun. Sharp splinters flew right past their faces and several trees collapsed as if to block their way.

“Kyaaahh!?”

“Hey, if you’re going to panic, at least get your mouth away from my ear.”

“I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared. Gnaw, gnaw, gnaw.”

“Nnh, don’t calm yourself by gently biting me!!”

Mariydi’s control of the motorcycle could only be called superb for managing so well while accompanied by a complete amateur who did not even know how to lean her body. Even so, it could have been worse. The transport helicopter’s heavy machinegun extended straight out from the side cargo door. That meant it could not target the fleeing motorcycle while also following after it. It was forced to fly such that their paths drew a cross shape, so Mariydi and the helicopter were constantly on the move. And the thick fog and curtain of trees prevented the helicopter from pinpointing their location so easily.

The heavy machinegun attached to the cargo door was meant to spray bullets to hold back the enemy while the helicopter hovered defenselessly and lowered infantry by rope. Unlike the chain guns on the jaw of slender attack helicopters, no one expected it to actually hit and destroy a target.

A ground attack helicopter or a fighter would be able to electronically adjust the direction of the gun while synced to the pilot's gaze, so Mariydi and Nancy would have been blown to pieces almost immediately.

That said, a single hit was all it would take.

While pursued by the lead rain pouring from the heavens, Mariydi's small nose twitched.

She smelled old asphalt, which was out of place this deep in the Scandinavian forest.

"Old Route 20. I see. If I take that down about 40 kilometers, *that* will be waiting for us."

"Wh-what?"

As soon as she sensed it, Mariydi further opened the throttle and reached triple digit speeds not normally seen while off road.

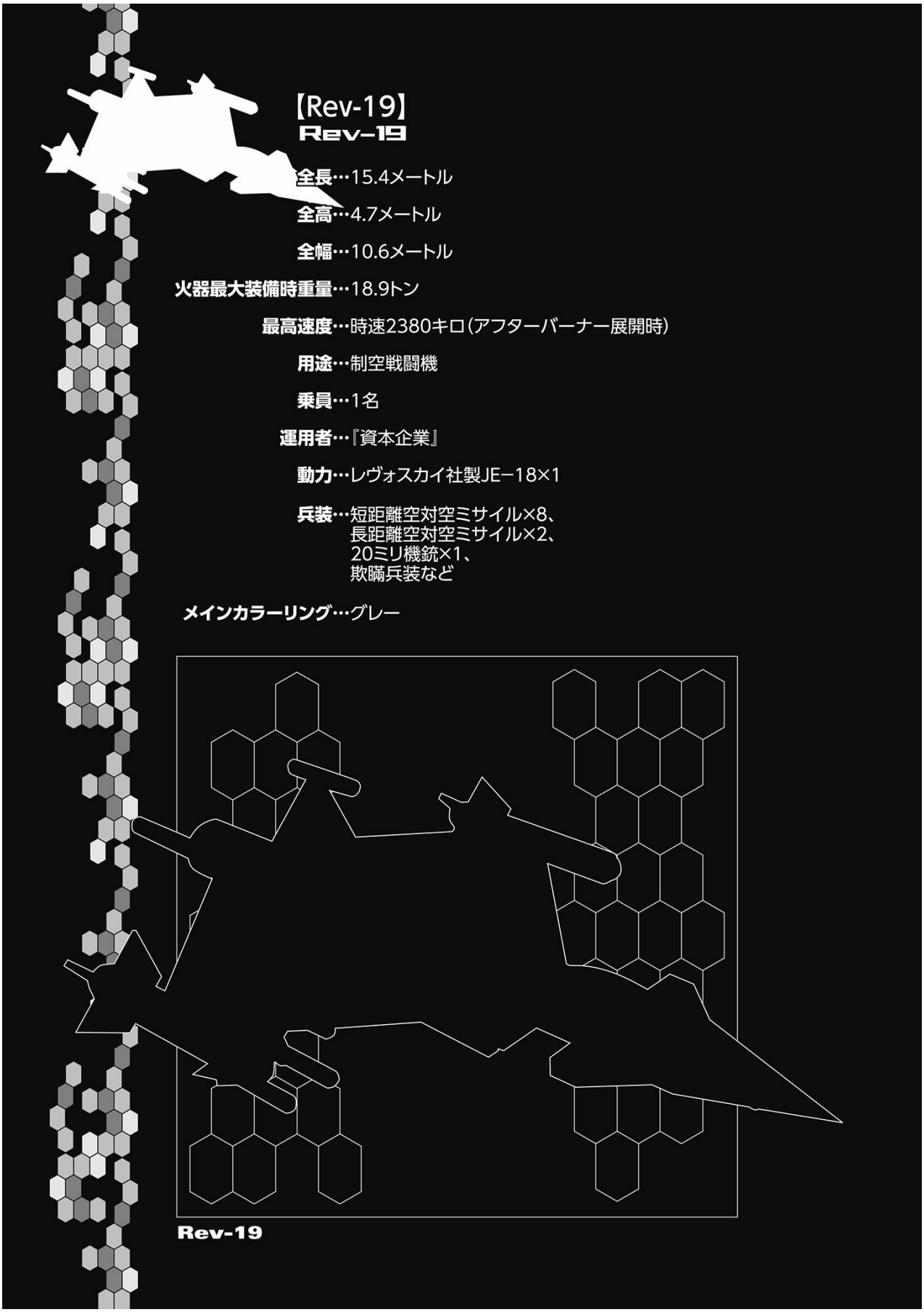
They drove over a small bump.

And then the extraordinary monster of an off-road motorcycle flew through the air.

They soared over the gap and landed on the forgotten elevated highway.

The jump was more than 20 meters long and 5 meters tall, so it was more of a circus act than proper driving.

The elevated highway ran perpendicular to the mountain slope and it was built to pass between the gaps in the mountains. The road was wide with 4 lanes in either direction, but even that was barely enough room. As soon as they landed, Mariydi shifted down to decelerate and twisted the handlebars to make a wide arc while the tires screeched and slid. She completed the 90 degree curve with only 2 cm until they hit the central divider and then she set off down the highway.



Something heavy passed by overhead.

It was not the previous transport helicopter. It was much faster. It was a group of Capitalist Corporations fighters that had likely been sent out to preserve their newfound air superiority – that is, to drive off the Information Alliance fighters that were sure to be scrambled. The small fighters had a single engine and main wings with an odd, diamond-like shape. They were high-mobility fighters that used their light weight for sharp turns instead of a high top speed. Mariydi looked up and sighed.

“The Rev-19s that are built for pure dogfighting, hm? That’s not my squadron.”

“?”

With their bodies and minds worn out from the intense battle with the SAMs, those problem children had disobeyed the BtB order from CT and continued flying as a plea for their fallen commander’s plight. They must have similarly refused the order to hunt down Mariydi, so the high-mobility fighters of their MPs had likely stuck close to them to demand they make a forced landing (FL).

Mariydi still did not know what was happening to her, but they were on her side.

She could not betray their expectations, so she had to survive this no matter what.

The engine gave a roar.

Mariydi and Nancy were riding a monster machine that managed to seamlessly combine off-road suspension with a large city-racing engine. Perhaps as a sign of military pride, it could easily reach 200kph when accelerated on an open road. A helicopter’s top speed tended to be between 300 and 400kph, so they could not shake it. However, this did allow them to lure it elsewhere.

As they drove across the dangerously cracked highway, they heard the transport helicopter’s unrestrained rotor noise approaching once more. To aim for the fleeing target from the side cargo door, it had to shift its route to the side to fly parallel to the motorcycle. Of course, that removed it from the shortest route, causing a loss in speed.

With heavy sounds of gunfire, giant holes appeared in the asphalt. A span of only a few minutes seemed to stretch out endlessly. After a few scattered bursts of destruction, the helicopter passed Mariydi and Nancy. Mariydi clicked her tongue.

“They plan to take down the highway instead of me directly.”

“Ugeh!? They’d go that far!?”

“The elevated highway has already deteriorated pretty badly and that HMG can fire bullets the size of anti-materiel rifle ammo at a rate of 2000 per minute. Concentrated fire can break through a concrete bridge.”

But unlike the forest’s trees, it could not do so instantly. If they were to make it in time for Mariydi as she raced along at 200kph, they would have to start well ahead of her.

Just like train tracks, an elevated highway became impassible if even a single point was destroyed, so the helicopter knew they did not need to stop Mariydi right away. They assumed they would win if they flew 10 or 20km ahead and destroyed the road there.

“H-h-how can you be so calm? I’m pressed up against your back, but I can’t sense your heart racing at all.”

“Get off of me. It’s hot enough already.” Mariydi grimaced in annoyance. “And isn’t it obvious? I already know we can win this.”

“?”

The fried shrimp tilted her head while still holding onto Mariydi.

Immediately, one of the small fighters attempting to secure air superiority was blown to smithereens.

Nancy choked and her breath seemed to strike Mariydi in the back.

The glasses fried shrimp’s entire body gave off an aura of confusion, so Mariydi explained in a singsong voice.

“This is the Northern Restricted Zone. Look left or right and you’re bound to see some muddy soldiers fighting over something. The grim reaper lurks everywhere here.”

“E-eek?”

“Whether Capitalist Corporations, Information Alliance, Legitimacy Kingdom, or Faith Organization, the potatoes of the four world powers ignore the current trends to fight it out in trenches with a shovel in hand. You never know when you’ll get a knife in the side, so you should really keep an eye out, especially when you’re feeling victorious.”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!!”

If someone was aiming a gun at them, the color of their uniform did not matter.

Even if they were fellow Capitalist Corporations soldiers, she would mercilessly send them to hell.

Another explosion occurred shortly thereafter. With the fighter protecting the sky taken out, it went without saying what happened to the helicopter attempting to destroy the highway. The other fighters finally realized what was happening and fled like small birds, but it was too late. Unlike with the Thor's Hammer, it was not the accurate pursuit that made this explosion frightening. It was the large scale. It almost looked like a giant firework had been launched into the sky. Something was fired to a general point in the air and then a horrifically large explosion caught all of the aircraft in the area, turning them into scraps.

It was not a missile.

Mariydi knew what it was.

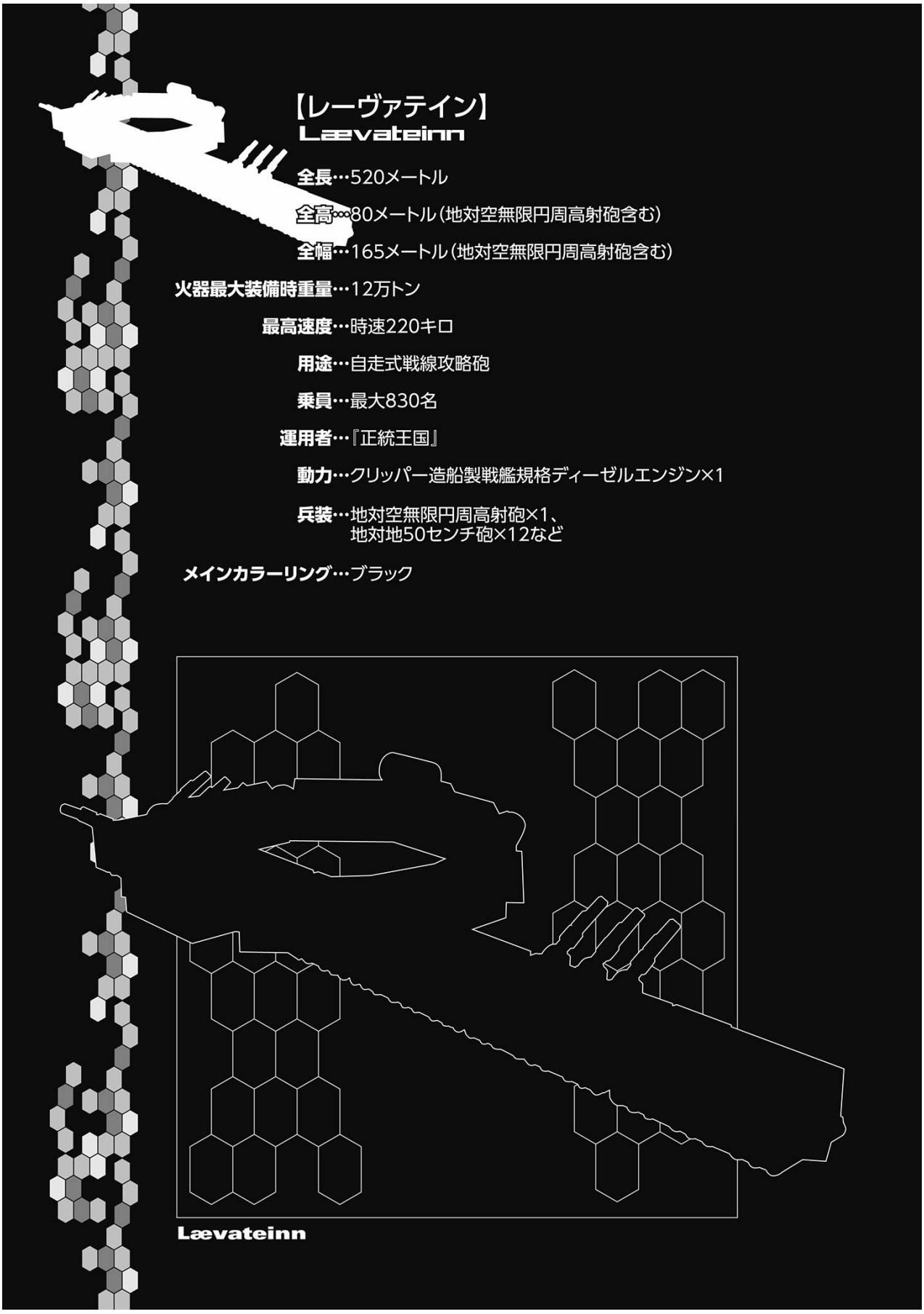
"That's a shell from the Lævateinn, a Legitimacy Kingdom combat train. It didn't produce a mushroom cloud today, so I guess they're still being stingy with the explosives."

"Mushroom…cloud…?"

"You can make one of those with a normal bomb if you use a ridiculous amount of explosives. It definitely looks impressive, but they mainly detonate it high in the sky to hit relatively high-flying fighters and unstable attack helicopters with the explosive blast and turbulence. There's almost no chance of the fireball and shockwave reaching us on the surface. Attacking the ground directly with something that big might break their internal rules or something."

This was why she had used the highway.

She had wanted to get within firing range of that thing to pit her enemies against each other. The military motorcycle could reach speeds exceeding 200kph in no time, so she could travel 50km in only 15 minutes. Pursuing her without thinking was a good way to cross an invisible border without noticing.



This was the obvious result, but it was easier to target airborne targets than

surface ones.

Traditional shells were not guided, but that did not matter.

They only had to chuck the shell close to the center of an enemy group and use the fearsome blast and turbulence to surround the targets in a wide-range vortex of destruction that could not be dodged. The skill of the pilot never came into play. A kilometers-wide surface dropped down on the aircraft like a flyswatter.

“I think we called it the Drop Ceiling.” Mariydi narrowed her eyes and looked up at the explosive roar she had once experienced herself. “That mass of armor and ridiculous firepower can only run along the preset rails. Our combat engineers finally managed to destroy the rails in a suicide sabotage mission, but even after being rendered stationary by derailing, it’s been pushing back the Capitalist Corporations war front for 2 weeks. And it’s just one armored weapon.”

The thick fog should have been obstructing their view, but the image burned vividly into her retinas. That meant the tremendous explosive blast in the sky had blown away the natural band of fog.

And beyond the forcibly cleared fog, a giant monolith rose up between the mountains a few kilometers away like Ayers Rock. No, it only looked that way. It was actually a mass of steel armor with a giant engine for mobility. It was still fighting even after being derailed, so it had to be difficult to destroy just by blowing it up.

The deadly birds who had ruled overhead had either been shot down or forced to withdraw. The sky was open once more. The giant derailed combat train had also fallen silent. But not because it was letting Mariydi go. Its giant targeting system probably could not capture something so small on the ground.

Mariydi had successfully escaped the Capitalist Corporations’ hounds, but her expression was far from cheerful.

She had also had a bitter experience with that thing. Her allies in the sky had been shot down and she had heard the voices of their ground support begging for help over the radio before falling silent.

“The Lævateinn…”

“Th-they say to let sleeping dogs lie, don’t theyyyy?”

“That’s not an option.” Mariydi sighed. “I don’t know why the higher ups have invented these false accusations about me, but they’re an organization. They

didn't do this on a whim. Conspiracies aren't cheap. If they don't have a reason and some profit to earn, they wouldn't go to the effort of framing me like this. But I have no idea what that could be. No idea whatsoever."

"H-how can you say that when you'll shoot someone in the arm just to test themmm? You have to have made all sorts of grudges."

"I'll throw you off, fried shrimp. …Ahem. That means I must have seen something I shouldn't have. And the specific false accusation they're going with is interesting. They claim I intentionally got shot down to send the military secrets of my fighter into enemy territory."

"A-and?"

"They wouldn't need to focus so much on an outdated fighter. If they just want to frame and capture me, they only have to stick some white powder in my locker while I'm away from the base. If they went out of their way to mention the destroyed fighter, they must need it. That way they can focus on the fighter and quickly recover it in the name of preventing a leak of technological information." Mariydi paused for a beat. "In other words, there's something in that crashed Zig-27. It must hold some record of me unwittingly coming into contact with something. …I want to recover my fighter's flight recorder. It must have recorded something no one was supposed to know."

Whatever it was, it was likely closely related to the ridiculous sum of 50 billion dollars. That was supposedly the amount of platinum the delinquent soldiers had in their artificial bones and the total sum of the rewards offered by the Capitalist Corporations companies with interests in the Northern Restricted Zone. It was unclear how much of this was true or not, but this was no longer a forgotten battlefield. It was a hotspot fighting over enough money to buy 10 Objects.

"What's your point!? Then go hiking through the mountains and gather the trash you need. What does this have to do with that monster weapon called the Lævateinn!?"

"Fighters don't just vanish after the pilot bails out. They'll fly for a bit even with no one at the controls. And I'm not going to drop a plane onto one of the cities civilians build in this land of blood and gun smoke for some odd reason. I made sure to aim it toward the empty mountains before bailing out. However…"

"Huh? Um? S-surely you don't mean what I think you do. That's just my pessimism talking, right!?"

"Yes," simply replied Mariydi. "It seems the detonation of the Thor's Hammer

SAMs altered its course. Thinking back, I'm pretty sure most of the wreckage fell near the Lævateinn. I need to silence that thing if I'm going to grab the scorched fried egg of a flight recorder."

"No, no, no! Please leave me behind! I don't want to do thaaa

Track 05: Sword of Catastrophe

Mariydi did not want to let go of the military motorcycle since it had excellent specs, but some things could not be helped. She had concluded the Legitimacy Kingdom's Lævateinn combat train could not target it, but she had to be extra cautious here. In other words, continuing along the elevated highway would be too dangerous and descending to the forest was safer. And since there were no interchanges along the way, she had to abandon the motorcycle to climb down.

Luckily, they were deep in the forest and mountains.

There was a tall tree right next to the highway and she could easily descend using its branches and trunk for footholds.

After descending the height of a 3-story building and setting foot on the humus that was a friend to the great kingdom of insects, Mariydi heard a trembling and unreliable voice from overhead.

Nancy Jolly-Roger had made it partway down and then gotten too scared to continue in either direction, so she was clinging to the tree trunk and shaking.

"E-ee-eeeeeek… It's too high. I'm no good with heeeeiiiiights."

"Hurry on down, panty-shot supplier."

"Dbche- wait…kyaaaahhhh!?"

As soon as she jumped in shock, the fried shrimp lost her balance and fell, breaking smaller branches along the way. She had gotten stuck partway down from a 3-story height, so it was about the same as jumping down from a tallish slide. Plus, she landed on soft humus.

After landing right on her butt with her legs spread as if to show off the underwear below her torn stockings, Nancy tearfully rubbed the back of her hips.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow."

"Get up already, chick panties. If that's all it did to you, it can't hurt too badly."

"Please don't make that nickname so specifiiiic!!"

“I may not be one to talk, but kiddy-style cotton material? Really?”

“I like how it feels!! And the only underwear with the soft material I like happens to have this kind of picture on iiiit!!”

“If you say so. …If you ask me, it looks more like you have the kind of humiliation fetish that leads people to wear a chastity belt below their normal cloth-…”

“Be quiet, you monster! Be quieeeeet!!”

The busty glasses fried shrimp blushed a bright red, panicked, and covered Mariydi’s mouth with a hand. She had not wiped off her soft hand after falling into the humus, so the ace pilot punished her rudeness by grabbing her wrist and lightly throwing her aside.

This time, the chick panties girl was flipped upside down and sticking her butt into the air as she tearfully complained about her terrible treatment.

“I-I have rights as a human being, you knowww?”

“Sorry, single flower vase, but this is the Northern Restricted Zone.”

The Lævateinn had continued to fight for more than 2 weeks after being derailed by a suicide sabotage mission and it was stopped only a few kilometers from here. No amount of air-to-surface missiles (ASM) had managed to stop it. The monster was so solid that no one could think of a way to destroy it. And this dark forest was already within range of its deadly attack.

“That thing is covered in battleship-style heavy cannons that use old-fashioned gunpowder charges. That means it can make surface-to-surface attacks just fine. If it notices us, moving behind cover won’t save us. It’ll crush the entire terrain flat with a giant hand and that’s that.”

(But that also means it can’t fire on us if we’re too close for the battleship-level of parabolic arc it needs.)

It was the same as a mortar. If the target was too close, the curved ballistic path made it harder to aim. And even if you did successfully aim, you could easily be caught in the blast yourself.

“…”

“Ah. Wait, please waaaiiit…”

Unless they destroyed the Lævateinn that had effective control of this area, they

could not focus on a search for the flight recorder. Mariydi was currently armed with a carbine, grenades, a handgun, and a military knife. She had already used the rocket launcher and it would not have done anything against a steel mass the size of Ayer's Rock anyway.

(Honestly, this is the problem with an intentionally isolated Galapagos like this. And why is a weapon larger than an Object fidgeting nervously around over there?)

At any rate, observation came first.

That meant approaching the Lævateinn that could no longer move.

"Pant, pant."

"Don't breathe so heavily and writhe around like that just from a short hike through the mountains. Are you supposed to be a walking sex symbol?"

"C-can you at least call me a sexy young ladyyy?"

"You have some nerve suggesting that in those chick panties."

"Please stop repeating personal information like you've stumbled on a great secreeeeet!"

As she panted, gasped, and moaned, Nancy gave off a slight sweet scent which left Mariydi very worried about the possibility of any trained dogs in the area. She wanted to believe that an indoor worker would not wear perfume if she was heading to the battlefield, but if it was not perfume, what was that incredibly sweet aroma mixed into her sweat? Was it a human-attracting pheromone that had yet to be properly discovered?

As they continued along, the forest started to thin out, so Mariydi came to a stop. With the handmade ghillie suit over her head, she kept low and leaned against the final tree.

She saw a gray mass there.

"A-a city…?"

"That's the destroyed capital of Asgard. That's all that remains of the largest city here back before Scandinavia was known as a restricted zone. It was known as the City of 5 Million back then."

It was a strange sight. It looked like it had been destroyed by an aerial

bombardment, but the damage was worse in the center than the outer edges. Some diagonally-tilted high-rise buildings remained on the outer edges, but the damage grew worse further in and it eventually became nothing more than unrecognizable rubble.

“Asgard used an Object reactor to power the energy infrastructure needed for its giant financial district, but it was also surrounded by a powerful anti-air and anti-surface cannon formation made up of 12 main cannons and more than 100 others. It used thick underground power cables to supply immense amounts of power to the swiveling laser beam cannons and railguns attached to the ground by powerful concrete foundations. You can think of it as an Object that took the nuke-resistant spherical main body and spread it out into the form of a city.”

“So how did this happen to it…?”

“Look at Asgard as a weapon. How could you kill it and secure your safety while it was pouring extra-large shells down on you?”

“Ah.”

“Enough aerial bombs and SSMs to blow away the reactor rained down on the City of 5 Million without even an evacuation warning. In the end, the reactor buried deep below went berserk, triggered a major explosion, and obliterated Scandinavia’s largest financial city. What you see here is the result. I’ve only seen it in the video archives, but there supposedly wasn’t even a sea of blood left. That’s the horrifying war record that led to Objects being restricted from Northern Europe.”

That overwhelming social trauma was too strong for the lie of the clean wars to overpower it.

This was the only place in the world where anti-Object statements were not shut out of mass media.

It was more than just the number of deaths. There was still plenty of speculation as to why there had been no evacuation warning: for the strategic advantage, a simple miscommunication, someone had acted rashly to protect their allies from the massive artillery fire, etc. But there would also have been misguided hatred for the 5 million people who had secured a nice peaceful life in the middle of a quagmire of a war.

It was a local issue, but that negative turning point of history had twisted the flow of time for the entire world.

And now the Legitimacy Kingdom military had enshrined a different sort of colossal weapon atop the giant grave marker for those 5 million. They could only thank god that the Lævateinn combat train did not have a JPlevelMHD reactor installed.

“By the way, the band called Boy Racer used Asgard for the jacket photo of their major debut album. Those bastards are defiling a holy site.”

“…”

It was time to get a look at that scum.

The Lævateinn had used the existing tracks and re-laid some of the tracks that had been lost in the explosion of the destroyed capital of Asgard. That was why tracks ran through what should have been a ghost town with a giant crater in the center.

It was 520 meters long, 65 meters wide, and 40 meters tall.

Long ago during the early days of SALs, trust in aerial transportation had been shaken, so there had been a rush to develop land and sea routes. It had apparently been a magma-like mixture of national research and amateur inventions. 8-lane large-scale transportation routes, which were even wider than the elevated highway Mariydi and Nancy had used earlier, were seen here and there throughout the Northern Restricted Zone. Those were one sign of the struggles during that chaotic time.

It really was like a mass of black steel.

If you knocked a high-rise building on its side and filled its entire volume with special steel, would it look as impressive? A battleship could be sunk by opening a hole and letting the water in, but how much firepower would be needed to purely destroy one if it was on land? And the Lævateinn problem was even greater than that hypothetical battleship.

Among the giant train’s total of 6 cars, the large circular mass crossing between 3 of the cars stood out the most.

“Wh-what is that…?”

“The demonic sword that saved us. The high-speed gun car moves along a closed loop of linear rails and the appropriate amount of both centrifugal force and liquid gunpowder are used to fire the shell the appropriate distance. This kind of artillery normally uses solid gunpowder, so some high military official must really

want to intervene in the deployment of new methods. Of course, even this crazy thing can reach the stratosphere." Mariydi sounded exasperated by that ridiculous obsession. "The front and back cars have connectors to the circular rail that act as a damper so that it can slide properly around the curves without doing any damage. But it's just too heavy for bridges and too wide for normal tunnels, so it has to travel along the coast. And that means you should assume it has the destructive power to make up for those negatives."

Needless to say, that was not its only weapon. The top had so many guns embedded in it that it looked like honeycombs. Those adjustable antiaircraft guns functioned like a pitching machine, so the internal rifling could be adjusted to the values needed to apply the appropriate spin for curving the shell however one wanted. The individual shots were not all that accurate, but the many guns provided a storm-like barrage across a full surface. Mariydi had felt a chill in her gut when faced by that during an earlier bombing mission. Even if you escaped the one-shot mushroom cloud, you would have to face another hell while fighting the turbulence.

The Lævateinn was not unharmed.

It had small damage here and there and the armor looked like it had been torn apart by claws in places. But not even all that damage was enough to stop it. The real problem was its incredible mass. It was like challenging a beached great white shark with only a plastic fork.

(Attacking with the weapons I have on hand won't get me anywhere. Can I trigger an explosion like with the Thor's Hammer?)

That giant structure was being run without an Object reactor. There were plenty of fuel trucks and thick hoses around it. There would also be combat engineers re-laying the rails destroyed by the sabotage operation to get the Lævateinn back on track.

The area had been turned into a small city.

Just like the giant aircraft carriers of an older age, a crew of 3000 to 5000 was used to run a single weapon system. All of those people needed food, clothing, and a bed to sleep in and entertainment facilities were also a must to maintain their mental health, so a military weapon really would begin behaving much like an independent city.

It was easy to forget given the Lævateinn's size, but the area was full of collapsed buildings and rubble blocked the roads like the aftermath of a landslide. They may have intentionally caused some collapses so they could use them like trenches. It

would probably look like a giant three-dimensional labyrinth when viewed from a satellite.

“Uheh. How can they stand all this dust? The air must be so stuffy…”

“Let’s take a look at the ruler of this mansion of trash. The mansion they’ve created might seem like heaven to them, but I really don’t want to mess with someone else’s pile of trash. Of course, they would probably feel the same if our positions were reversed.”

Mariydi then breathed an exasperated sigh.

“An Object needs a battalion of about 1000, but are these people going for a world record or something? Why would they go this far? I feel like I’m looking at a ridiculously large paella pot.”

“C-can you please stop talking about food…”

“Yeah, the whole area will smell like roast meat before long.”

“That wasn’t what I meeeaaaant!”

Whether it was a tank or a fighter, armored weapons were basically collections of fuel and explosives. The bigger they were, the greater the risk of an induced explosion. That was the reason the damage from a strategic stealth bomber was so much greater than from a small reciprocating engine plane used for disseminating agrochemicals.

Giant weapons were all twisted in their own way.

Mariydi sometimes suspected that *those* Objects had nuke-resistant armor not out of fear of damage from without but to manage the risks they contained inside.

“So it’s using diesel fuel. Did they just use a ship or submarine engine?”

“?”

“Only about 800 people are directly involved in running the weapon. But conveniently roasting everything within that thick armor would not be easy. Using an explosion here would be difficult.”

Besides, she doubted they could reach the Lævateinn just by approaching on the surface.

The abandoned city's buildings had been demolished in a calculating way to cover everything in rubble and create a giant three-dimensional labyrinth. The only ways through would definitely have soldiers posted and the entire labyrinth could be seen from the Lævateinn which stuck up above everything else. And if they were noticed, a battle with thousands of soldiers would be unavoidable. Getting close enough to be in the giant cannon's blind spot was not enough.

"Wh-what exactly are you going to dooo?"

"If we can't directly destroy the weapon, we just have to get rid of the people controlling it."

Mariydi put her hands on her slender hips, took a breath, and thanked the wonderful air that covered this blue planet.

"There's tons of fuel here, so let's slaughter them with common carbon dioxide."

Even if it only looked like rubble now, this place had once been the largest financial city in Scandinavia. It had plumbing, power cables, gas pipes, fiber optic cables, subway tracks, flood-prevention waterways, and plenty more spread out underground like a giant spider web. That meant it was relatively easy to sneak into that "small city" with a few thousand people working in it.

Mariydi and Nancy used the underground maintenance entrance for a power cable thicker around than their arms. It did not look like a normal high-voltage line, so it was probably a military standard used to carry power from the central reactor to the anti-air and anti-surface laser beams (LB) and railguns (RG). However, rainwater had gotten in through the small holes used to help open the manhole, so the ground below their feet was mostly coated in dried sludge.

Mariydi used a torch made from a stick and some rags to advance through the tunnel until she spotted a ladder up to a manhole. She observed the surface through the small holes on the manhole cover.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking something."

After determining they were below a truck, she stealthily opened the manhole and stabbed her thick knife into the belly of the military truck. It did not have to gush out. She only needed a unique-smelling liquid to pour down underground.

She repeated the process a few times, opened a hole in the tank of a fuel truck

along the way, and then nodded in satisfaction back underground.

Unable to bare the unfamiliar stench, Nancy's head wobbled unsteadily on her shoulders.

"Urp. I think this is going to kill us fiiiirst."

"I'm already done."

They now had puddles here and there in the spider web of crisscrossing underground pathways. After confirming they connected like an amoeba, Mariydi took the torch back from Nancy and tossed it into the puddle.

The darkness was instantly driven back by the color orange.

It was not just gasoline that was burning. The dried sludge on the ground seemed to be working like dried grass.

Mariydi shut an eye as the heat pressed in on her head.

"An underground fire is hard to notice from aboveground, but the updraft produced by the heat will carry the contaminated air up through the manholes."

Carbon dioxide was everywhere, but it was colorless and odorless. By the time the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers working "above the smokestacks" realized where the smoke and odd smell were coming from, it would be too late. Humans lived in earth's atmosphere, but if the ratio of nitrogen or carbon dioxide changed even slightly and reduced the amount of oxygen by even a few percentage points, they would fall unconscious and collapse.

That was simple enough to do in a sealed space, but was it really possible in the open air?

There was only one answer.

"They knocked down the buildings to make a trench-like three-dimensional labyrinth. After working there day in and day out, surely they know all too well how stagnant the air gets within all those thick walls."

"B-but will this really fill the Lævateinn with carbon dioxiiide? Something that big is sure to have purification filters on its ducts."

"That's why we have a little more work to do."

Mariydi walked to the safe exit she had made sure would be protected from the

flames and smoke.

“Whatever this means for the Lævateinn, the few thousand working outside of it will be dead now. So as long as we protect ourselves from the carbon dioxide, we can walk around outside without anyone stopping us.”

“A-and what does that get us?”

“The Lævateinn itself runs on a giant diesel engine. We just have to set this up like a suicide inside a car. If we approach the exhaust pipe and shove something inside to clog it up, the even-more-dangerous carbon monoxide it’s creating will fill the interior.”

Incidentally, what was commonly referred to as a “gasmask” was meaningless without a filter attached for the kind of toxin or bacteria one wanted protection from.

What would you use if excess carbon dioxide was reducing the amount of oxygen in the air?

The answer was simple: lime.

To omit the details, lime absorbed carbon dioxide, so it would allow you to breathe even inside the contaminated air. Theoretically, it could absorb the carbon dioxide from your own exhalations and let you breathe it again just like caustic soda.

This was not a chemical weapon that could be absorbed through the skin, so anyone could put one together for a summer break project using a plastic bottle and an anti-dust mask used for tunnel construction. The lime used for the filter could be found anywhere in the city full of rubble.

“That should do it.”

Mariydi opened a random manhole and climbed up to the surface.

This was the same place as the jacket photo for Boy Racer’s debut album. It was like a holy site for the girl and it spread out around her like a dull world of death.

“International treaties aren’t perfect. Chemical reactions produced by normal fires can’t be classified as chemical attacks. You couldn’t exactly wage war otherwise, but it’s still pretty frightening…”

“Hbh, eek.”

There had not been a single gunshot or a drop of spilled blood, so thousands of soldiers lay collapsed on the ground without ever knowing what was happening to them. And their expressions showed it had not been a peaceful death. More than pain, their faces were plastered with looks of fear and confusion concerning the sudden death approaching them. It looked like they had been hit by a strange curse.

“Uehhh, urp.”

“You can vomit in your mask if you want, but don’t remove it.”

The Lævateinn combat train had fallen silent. Those inside had to have learned of the abnormal situation outside thanks to the transmissions from their allies. They had not even cracked the solidly-sealed explosion-resistant door, but that was of course to prioritize their own lives. The dead were piled up on top of each other near the entrance that had never opened.

Mariydi had no right to criticize anyone here.

She was the one who had created this hell.

And without the thousands of workers, Mariydi and Nancy could reach the wall of the giant weapon. Just like a human could not directly view a fly on their face, point-blank range was a blind spot.

“Now, then.”

Mariydi pulled out a perfectly normal blue plastic sheet and balled it up. The exhaust duct was on the roof of the first car. Normally, it would have been impossible to climb a 40 meter cliff, but there were plenty of crane and elevator trucks around it for maintenance. She left the fried shrimp below as she walked along a diagonally-extended metal arm to reach the Lævateinn’s roof where she stuffed the balled-up plastic sheet in the exhaust duct.

That alone would be effective enough and it would only work better if the heat melted the plastic.

(Preparing multiple filtered ventilation openings seems kind of meaningless when you line all the intake points up in one place. Well, they may have wanted to keep them all together to more easily control hem in case of an internal rebellion. Whatever the case, I might as well plug them all up along with the exhaust port.)

Repeating the same task over and over could break one’s spirit, but it was not bad when she knew it was having real results.

Good things come to those who wait.

And even if the Lævateinn crew noticed what was happening and rushed outside, their fate would be little different in the oxygen-deprived air. Their only options were death in a cramped space or death in a wide open space.

A short distance away, Mariydi and Nancy waited a good while to make sure the giant weapon was dead.

There had been a chance those inside would panic and desperately scatter that incredible firepower randomly about, but that never happened. Since the crew would not have known what exactly happened to them, they would not have even known if there was an enemy at which to direct their hatred.

The Lævateinn had been silenced.

“Let’s get going. The other world powers will move in once they learn the demonic sword is broken and we’ll be in trouble if the Capitalist Corporations resumes their game of tag. Let’s keep the wind direction in mind and remove our masks once we’re far enough away.”

“I think there’s something wrong with a world where this cruel method doesn’t violate any international treaties.”

Finding the crashed Zig-27 fighter was entirely reliant on Mariydi’s memories from her pleasure flight down in the torn parachute. She estimated the direction and distance based on what she had seen then.

And after experiencing a second tragedy, the destroyed capital of Asgard had plenty of motorcycles and trucks with the keys in the ignition, so they borrowed a Legitimacy Kingdom four-wheel drive truck.

“Puhahh. I’m finally free of that thing.”

Mariydi of course climbed into the driver’s seat and removed her handmade gasmask, but…

“Hm? Oh, hell.”

“What is it?”

“…Nothing.”

The fried shrimp in the passenger seat looked puzzled, but Mariydi only blushed and refused to explain. Sounds of metal joints adjusting continued for a bit, but they had nothing to do with starting up the vehicle.

Finally, the glasses girl looked down from Mariydi's face to her feet.

"…Hey, what do you think you're looking at? It's really nothing."

"Oh, are your legs too short to reach the-…"

"They aren't short! Don't screw with me, you lumps of fat!! Look at the overall proportional balance of my body and my hips are positioned higher than yours!!"

"Yes, yes. There are lots of sexy curves on that widdle body of yours."

"…"

"Wait! No! I'm sorry! How is it even possible to use a seatbelt like tha- gwehh?"

Simply put, she was struggling to adjust the driver's seat. Unlike the off-road motorcycle, it was difficult for her to use this macho military truck.

After moving her seat quite a bit lower than the passenger seat, Mariydi could finally stroke the foot pedals with her feet.

"Let's get going."

"Can you even see out with your seat that low?"

"Why are you surrounded by a victorious aura when you haven't done a damn thing!? And since when were you in any position to tease me, you burden!?"

Messing with the car stereo only found dumb, mass-produced pop songs with clichéd lyrics about love and dreams, so Mariydi clicked her tongue and connected her own handheld music player.

Intense deep notes immediately filled the solid truck.

"U-uwehhh!? What is this!?"

"It's Boy Racer's Crack Life. You've gotta play their major debut song if you're visiting this holy site!"

"Is this the band you were talking about…?"

“I don’t know what kind of biases you’ve let people give you, but I recommend watching what you say, you pleb.”

They left the city and returned to the conifer forest. In one area, the trees had been knocked over and were smoking. The Zig-27 crash seemed to have ignited them, but it had ended as a localized fire instead of growing into a large wildfire.

(It’s all still mostly in one piece. No one really cares about fighters these days, but maybe I should mix in some aluminum or iron oxide powder to incinerate it later.)

It was ironic that the more cutting edge the tank or fighter, the less allowable it was to have it destroyed on the front line. There had even been a time when stealth fighters were so expensive that they were only used to decorate showcases at air shows to intimidate enemy nations.

Regardless, the fighter’s flight recorder was her top priority.

After stopping the truck near the crash site, Mariydi watched out for the fuel tank and for unexploded ordnance like missiles as she crouched low and approached the center. Nancy the fried shrimp girl was in charge of perfectly following the path Mariydi took.

“There it is.”

Mariydi crouched down and pulled something from the mess of mangled metal scraps and wiring. It was a heat-resistant reinforced plastic package a little thicker than a slice of toast. It had been scorched black, but undoing the screws and removing the cover revealed the device inside was safe.

She connected her portable music player to the flight recorder with a cable and operated a dial to check through the data inside.

Flight recorder data was made to be incredibly difficult to modify or erase, but it could be easily viewed or played. It made sense considering its main purpose.

“So what happened just before the crash…?”

When shaken by intense inertial Gs while undergoing extreme tension, a pilot risked blacking out due to lack of blood to the brain. Memories while piloting a fighter could sometimes be vague or hazy.

She remembered blowing up the SAMs with her regular gun to save her wingmen in the Ice Squadron, but that was while experiencing blindness and a piercing headache courtesy of the laser light. That left so much of an impact that she could not at all remember what dumb things she had said with her wingmen when it

was not a life or death issue.

She used the objective recording device to recover that lost time.

…However, she did not know what exactly had triggered this trouble, so she could not just input a keyword to find the results like it was a search engine. She could speed up the playback to an extent, but she still had to listen through the recording.

And…

“Fwehh. Are you still not dooone?”

“Quit distracting me, fried shrimp.”

“Are you sure you aren’t checking the wrong part of the recording?”

“…”

Mariydi glared at her, wondering if she was a demon who transformed people’s worries and doubts.

And she saw the idiot doing something.

“Hm, hm, hm, hm, hmmm☆”

“…Hey, fried shrimp. What in the world are you doing???”

“Tah dahhh! A crown of flowerrrrs☆”

“This is a battlefield where stepping on a branch can be the difference between life and death! So why are you picking all the flowers around here!?”

“You wouldn’t have such a harsh mindset if you didn’t put so much pressure on yourself. You need to forget all about that war mode and…look, when you wear this, you look so girly.”

The fried shrimp even removed Mariydi’s ghillie suit and placed the crown of flowers on her head.

“Why are you putting such an obvious target on my head, fried shrimp? Are you trying to get me shot by a sniper who could be hiding somewhere around here?”

“Didn’t we take out all the Lævateinn people?”

There could always be elites who had crossed the border…but arguing any further would accomplish nothing. She was defenseless enough just crouching down and struggling with the crashed fighter's recorder.

(I hope I can finish this soon…)

"~ ~ ~"

"Huh? Are you not used to dressing up cute? But you look so pretty, even if you aren't so pretty on the inside."

"Shut up! I'm trying to concentrate!"

While blushing and fidgeting restlessly, she finally found something different.

She heard some mechanical static.

"Ksshh…!! Kssshhh! …CT here…oblem with the datalink. Ksshh! Watch out for delays in the update speed!! Kssssshhhh!!"

"That's a lot of statiiic. Is it broken?"

"Of course not."

The flight recorder was designed to survive the impact of a crash. If that was enough to break it, it would need to be recalled.

In that case, what was causing this static drowning out the conversation?

"…Was the MA being jammed?"

Only after saying it herself did it start to seem real.

"Yes, that's right. We were hit by the Thor's Hammer's light because the map was slow to update, but that wasn't CT's fault. The jamming had nearly cut off the datalink, so the detailed updates to the map couldn't keep up."

But who had been behind the jamming?

It of course would not have been Mariydi's Capitalist Corporations. Then had it been the Information Alliance who controlled the Thor's Hammer? That seemed the most likely, but all four world powers were in constant conflict in the Northern Restricted Zone. It was possible the Legitimacy Kingdom or Faith Organization had done it to take advantage of the situation.

The girl heard her own recorded voice speaking.

“There seems to be an ordered signal inside the random noise.”

Her voice was not staticky because it had been recorded without passing through the communicator.

“Ha hahn. I bet they sent out this largescale jamming to hide the secret transmission they didn’t want anyone hearing. In that case…”

“Ksshh!! Ice H…3 to I…Girl 1. Kssshhh! Commander, what…ing? Kssshhh!!”

“The Zig-27 is loaded with too many processors. Why would I need to lock on with that many missiles at once? I’ll actually make that useful for once. I wonder if the spare processing space can decrypt this weak signal.”

Mariydi slapped her forehead.

Everyone cursed their past actions at some point, even if it was entirely useless.

“I’m such an idiot. I should have sent that to the unused AWACS server…”

“What does this meeeaaan?”

She had no way of answering that.

Someone in the Northern Restricted Zone had used largescale jamming to hide a secret chat and now they had put out a reward for capturing Mariydi who had secretly recorded it. That was all she knew. The identity and scope of her enemy was entirely unclear.

She doubted the actual decryption had finished.

She only had the raw data on the recorder, so she would need to hook it up to a supercomputer to find the answer. 50 billion dollars. Someone wanted this data enough to offer up a sum rivalling the cost of 10 Objects. They would never want her to have this. Whether she had decrypted it or not, possessing the original data could be used as deterrence and a threat.

And just as she considered that, she heard something.

It was a deep, bestial growling.

“Tch.”

The growling was coming from more than one place. They seemed to be surrounded. Mariydi clicked her tongue, picked up the scorched flight recorder, and looked around. These would not be trained military dogs. The shepherds and dobermans that had been made into soldiers would not bark or growl unless it was necessary as a threat. That suggested these were probably wild wolves or something.

But that was enough of a threat.

And carelessly firing a gun could alert any number of people to their position. This area was effectively controlled by the Legitimacy Kingdom's Lævateinn, but who could say how many soldiers from the other world powers had snuck in. Avoiding gunfire as much as possible was standard practice.

Thus, Mariydi quickly arrived at a plan.

"Strip, fried shrimp."

"My name is Nancyyy! And don't just ask me to strip! I'm a girl, this is a Scandinavian forest, it's freezing out, and I can't even explain all the ways that's messed uuuup!!"

"Just do it. I need that jacket of yours."

Mariydi swiped the fried shrimp's jacket without taking no for an answer and then wrapped it around her left arm. She then drew the military knife from her ankle using her right hand. She would let the wolf bite the thick cloth and then slash its throat. That would be the best way to slay the beast without injury or noise.

"If a wolf goes for you, you're on your own. It'll probably bite you on the ass and tear off one of the cheeks, but just think of it as a diet."

"No, thank yooouuu! Please give me a shield too! It's my jacket, isn't iiit!?"

"If you're that scared, then wrap your skirt around your arm. (Of course, you'll just be tossed around if you don't have the skill to guide it to your arm, fix its jaw in place, and slash its throat within 3 seconds.)"

"I think you have an obligation to explain that part you whispered!!"

She must really have been scared because she quickly unzipped the tight skirt, removed it, and held it in her hand, transforming herself into a chick panties glasses fried shrimp with an extra-large side of boobs, but then something odd happened.

There was definitely a low growling.

Something rustled through the underbrush and appeared between the trees.

But it was not a wolf or a wild dog.

It was….

"…A…human…???"

A young man in a military uniform was walking forward with his head lolling unsteadily back and forth. He was likely one of the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers who had been maintaining the Lævateinn. His eyes were unfocused, drool dripped from the corners of his mouth, and he was unarmed and emptyhanded, so he must not have been fully conscious. It was possible the oxygen deprivation attack using the carbon dioxide had partially destroyed his brain function.

Mariydi narrowed her eyes.

An enemy was an enemy. She considered taking him out with her knife, but then there was more movement.

The rustling came from more than one point. More and more men and women in military uniforms approached through the trees and underbrush. There were more than 20 in all. And that number continued to grow. Covert activity was meaningless at this point. Mariydi swapped out her knife for her carbine and did not hesitate to shoot one of the nonresistant soldiers.

Shot through the head, the young man collapsed backwards.

Unable to fully control the recoil, her aim was shifted a bit as she moved to the female soldier next to the man. This shot tore away the flesh of her shoulder, but then something odd happened.

The woman's expression remained unchanged.

Whether it hit her vitals or not, a direct hit from a rifle bullet should have been enough to kill her from shock, but she continued walking forward while dripping blood.

(What is this…?)

Shooting the woman through the heart did the trick, but that was as far as Mariydi got.

The gunshots seemed to have triggered something, so the 20+ unsteady soldiers began rushing in toward her.

Mariydi fell back while reducing their numbers as much as possible with the carbine. The fried shrimp (in a white blouse and chick panties) stared blankly for a moment before frantically running after the smaller girl. The group of soldiers continued charging forward even with dark red holes in their chest or gut, so they inspired a different sort of fear from a trained fighter.

But partial consciousness was not enough to explain this.

Their sense of pain and fear had clearly been erased and they were ruled by a desire for primitive violence. Yes, not one of them had drawn a handgun or knife. They only extended their arms, opened their mouths, and tried to bite the girls.

Mariydi and Nancy ran back to the military four-wheel drive truck.

Mariydi started the engine after tossing the unneeded jacket to Nancy who had circled to the passenger side. The fried shrimp began complaining with a pale face and tears behind her glasses.

“What was that!? Those are like the monsters in a zombie moviiieee!”

“Zombies…?”

That term caught in a corner of Mariydi’s mind.

Regardless, she set off in the truck. There were some battered soldiers in the way, but she floored the gas pedal regardless and ran them over with the high-riding truck. With each dull sound, Nancy held her head in her hands and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Oh, right. Zombies. I’ve heard about that before.

“What is it now? Is this a joooke!?”

“Not at all. I’m talking about synthetic molecular motors.”

“…Aren’t zombies caused by a mysterious virus?”

“It’s a similar idea.”

She regretted being unable to incinerate the mass of metal at the crash site, but she had no more use for this forest now that she had the flight recorder. The best course of action was to let the truck’s horsepower carry them out of there.

“Synthetic molecular motors are a technology that can draw out or suppress ‘tension’ at the molecular level in reaction to certain kinds of light or electromagnetic waves. It’s said they could be used to further shrink down computers and memory storage devices.”

“What does that have to do with zombiiieees?”

“It’s all in how you use it. Use your imagination: what if you disseminated a

combination of synthetic molecular motors that took on a shape almost identical to the rabies virus? Wouldn't you have an artificial object that acted exactly the same as rabies? And since it's completely artificial, you could freely switch it on and off from the outside. You could infect 10,000 people and only trigger symptoms in a specific person or you could link it to GPS and program it to make people go berserk only in a certain city while automatically switching off once they left that area. That would recreate the fictional zombies supposedly only seen in movies."

"…"

"Of course, actual rabies doesn't make people indiscriminately bite everyone around them like it does with dogs, but that's the scary thing about something completely artificial that can be fine-tuned to the liking of the developer. The smallpox-based experimental model I'm familiar with could alter the incubation period between infection and the appearance of mock symptoms. Think about it: what if you made the synthetic molecular motors so they would break down like a puzzle and leave the body after the target's death? Makes a scientific examination sound a lot more frightening, doesn't it? In the case of a rabies molecular motor, I bet they've made it spread far faster than the real thing. If I had to guess, I would say they don't invent a new disease from scratch so they can predict the level of damage in case of trouble."

The fried shrimp was rendered entirely speechless.

…But in that case, there had to be a third party who had disseminated the invisible rabies molecular motors to create the zombies to attack Mariydi and Nancy. They had to be the true villain here. They would be the vanguard of whoever wanted to retrieve the recording of that secret conversation masked by the jamming and whoever was willing to pay 50 billion dollars for the death of Mariydi who had recorded it.

Mariydi would have loved to catch them, but that would be difficult while being pursued from all sides. Escaping the infected area came first.

However, that was easier said than done.

The soldiers infected by the rabies molecular motors were not using handguns or knives, but…

"Wah!?"

The truck plowed through the white-eyed soldiers who dropped down from the trees alongside their path and the tire drove right over the head of another

soldier who crawled out from a bush. In a normal vehicle, the zombies could have gotten caught in the gap between the ground and the chassis and stopped the vehicle. And if enough of them were piled on top of each other, there was still a risk of that happening with the military truck.

This was based on rabies which was orally transmitted through bite wounds. If it had indeed been given an accelerated infection rate, driving even a military truck through the mountains and valleys back to the base might be dangerous. If a large group of zombies blocked the path in a narrow mountain pass, they would be stopped long enough for the zombies to surround the truck.

“Wh-wh-what do we dooo!?”

“Well.”

That left only one idea.

Mariydi Whitewitch was a fighter pilot.

“Let’s swipe a fighter from an AB around here. Not even those zombies can touch us if we’re cruising through the sky.”

Track 06: Dead to the Next

Did they chase after anything that moved, or could they be programmed to attack Mariydi specifically?

The military truck was fast enough to lose those chasing them from behind, but the ones who rolled out in front managed to reach the truck. Each time, the chassis shook violently, something wet tore apart, bodily fluids splattered out, and the tires and suspension were coated in the result. It was possible the radiator would eventually burn out and the engine would stall.

“I would be so sick of this if not for Boy Racer’s masterpiece.”

“You’ve been looping the same song so much I’m starting to feel dizzyyy!!”

Before even worrying about traveling by land or air, bringing these things back to her AB would be a problem. That meant she had to lose them first.

“…Either way, the answer is an aircraft.”

While Mariydi held the large steering wheel, Nancy the glasses fried shrimp discovered a folded paper map in the dashboard.

“This is a Legitimacy Kingdom truck, isn’t it? I think these marks all over the map are their military installations.”

“All over the map isn’t good enough. Give me some proper navigation.”

“Where even are we right nowww?”

Nancy looked unsure as she compared the view out the windshield with the map and Mariydi sighed when she glanced over to see her starting to spin the map around in her hands. That girl seemed to violate the law of conservation of energy because the amount she consumed and produced was entirely mismatched.

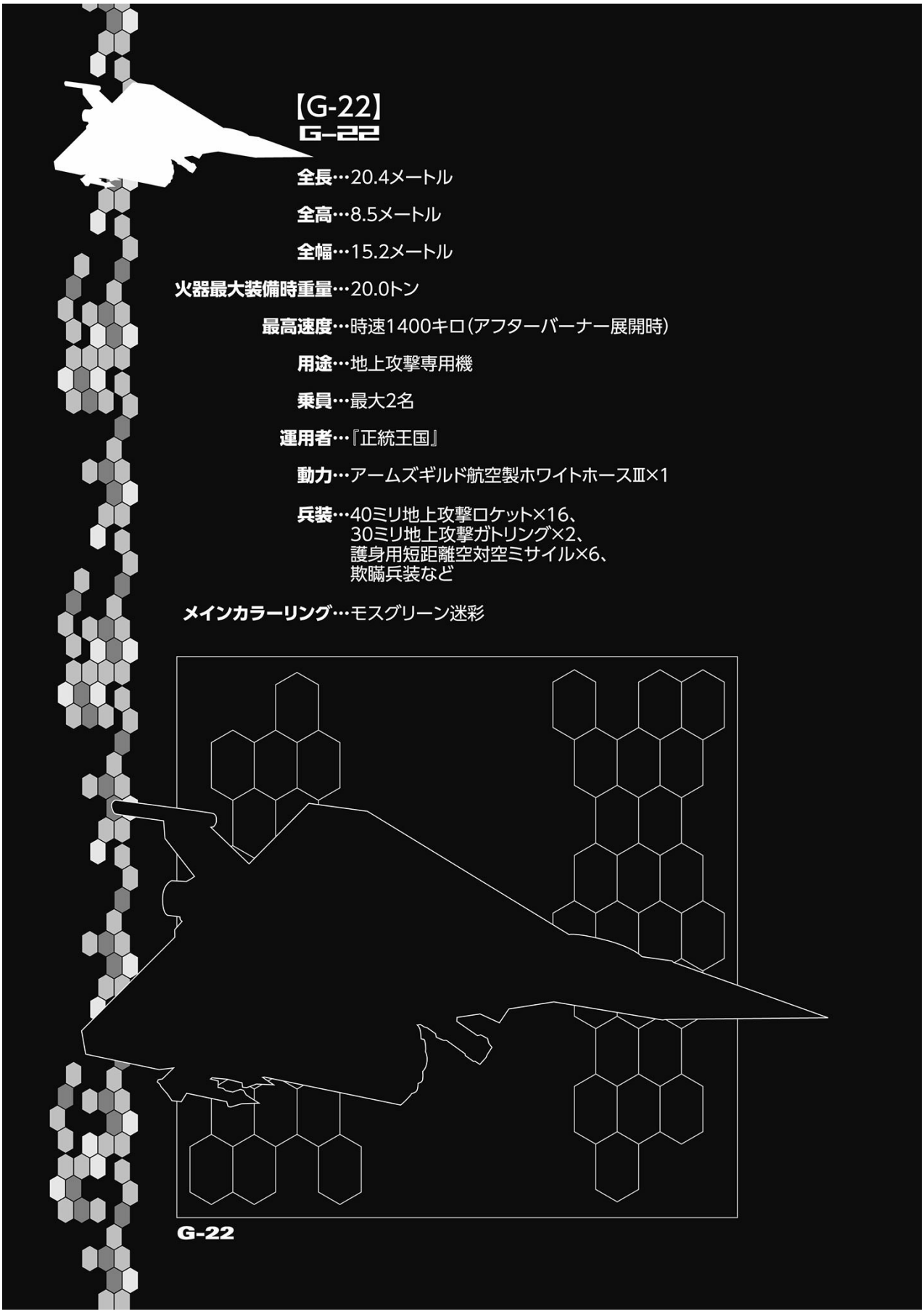
Gunfire that sounded like a broken buzzer burst from the sky.

One of the other world powers had apparently noticed the military zombies created using rabies molecular motors, so an attack craft with a large isosceles triangle silhouette was sewing a line across the ground using a Gatling gun. The zombies along the gun’s line burst like water balloons.

“E-eek!? We’re dead too if that hits usss!!”

“You’re exactly right…but they don’t seem to be shooting at us. And I doubt this is some kind of gentleman’s agreement.”

Mariydi kept her foot on the gas as she considered this development.



“Yes, since it’s a delta-wing-worshipping G-22 doing the shooting…they probably

think we're on their side since we're driving around in a Legitimacy Kingdom truck. That's convenient."

That meant a Legitimacy Kingdom attack craft was attacking Legitimacy Kingdom infected to protect a Legitimacy Kingdom base. It had probably taken them a while to make that decision, so Mariydi could already see several runways surrounded by fences. It was an airbase. This was far too close in for a defensive line.

And when faced with their misguided savior, Mariydi Whitewitch's decision was a simple one.

"This is perfect."

"You monster! You demooon!!"

"That assessment is right on target, but don't forget that there's an uncertain element in play here: we don't know which world power disseminated the rabies molecular motors. It might have been the Legitimacy Kingdom."

The fried shrimp shrieked, trembled so much her glasses made a chattering noise, and fell silent. If that was true, the people here were truly out of luck, but that was often how war was. It was always a possibility.

After the attack craft passed by overhead a few more times, it finally began slaughtering the zombies with rockets instead of its guns. At the same time, Mariydi stopped the military truck now that they were close enough to the AB.

"Dh, wha-!? If we don't hurry, the zombies will catch uuup!!"

"This is fine."

"?"

10 minutes later, Mariydi and Nancy began driving toward the Legitimacy Kingdom AB once more. They drove straight toward the guarded front gate without trying any kind of trickery.

"A-are we really doing thisss?"

"Put your skirt back on already. Besides, this isn't a spy action game with full anti-personnel radar. We can't sneak into a strictly-guarded base."

Even in a Legitimacy Kingdom truck, they would still be asked for identification at the gate. If it was found out they were from the Capitalist Corporations, they

would be arrested and detained, if not outright shot on the spot. There was a possibility they would be accepted in as a humanitarian act due to the zombie outbreak emergency, but counting on that would be as much of a gamble as betting all your money on 0 during a casino roulette game.

So after stopping in front of the main gate that had a pole lowered like at a railroad crossing, Mariydi had the following conversation with the guard soldier:

“Hey! We don’t have time to sit around and do this by the book!” shouted the guard. “Who are you? Show me your ID and get through the gate or the zombies will catch up!!”

“Oh, is that so? By the way, I’m sure you can hear the back seat shaking.”

“?”

“You sure are insensitive. He had to have been one of your comrades originally. And what do you think the zombie trapped in the foot space will do first if I raise the seat back?”

Someone bloody burst out of the opened back door and a quick but gory scene followed.

New screams and gunfire followed.

“Hm, hm, hmm. In we go.”

Mariydi used the chaos to break through the front gate’s pole and drive right on into the base while humming. The dangerous metal claws of a spike lock rose up across the bottom of the entrance, but blowing the tires was actually for the best. Anyone who saw the situation would assume one of their own trucks had panicked and gotten in an accident.

And with the chaos spread this far, there was no need to sneak around.

The biggest advantage of zombies was how a large enemy force could actually help them. The molecular motors had been given a greater infection speed than the original pathogen, so the infected group rapidly grew as the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers bit the other soldiers.

“This is just scary.”

The infected were filling the base even now. The only uniforms in evidence were Legitimacy Kingdom ones, but bullets and shells were flying within the base, the tanks and hoses of fuel trucks were torn, and aircraft fuel exploded, scattering

flames and black smoke.

Mariydi retrieved her handheld music player, left the truck with Nancy, crouched low, and ran across the vast AB while hidden by the rising smoke.

“There really is no such thing as an ally of justice.”

“I’m feeling pretty blessed following you around, though.”

Several fighters and attack craft were stopped next to the runways. Mariydi and Nancy approached one when no official orders had been sent out, but no one tried to stop them. That was because fires had started here and there in the hangars and runways, so the aircraft were being quickly moved to safety. Some were being towed and the pilots were directly hopping into the cockpits of others when the trucks were not arriving in time. Going through the entire tiresome process would have let the fuel tanks and missiles catch fire, so no one was worrying about the formalities.

“The S/G-31… A delta wing that was copied from the Faith Organization. Oh? Looks like they’ve updated it on their own by forcing in a second seat. It only just barely avoids a failing grade, but I guess I can’t be picky.”

“Hmm?”

No one paid Nancy any heed even though she was not wearing a proper g-suit, so they were apparently willing to take any help they could get. However, they must have been unaware of the ironclad rule that thieves were more than willing to help gather up emergency supplies and trash during a disaster.

Mariydi climbed into the front seat and Nancy into the back. Then they closed the clear canopy.

(The S/G-31 can do VTOL, but…well, it’s safer to use the runway if one’s available. Without weather data from CT, a surprise crosswind could flip us right over.)

Mariydi was finally able to remove the handmade ghillie suit from her head. And she indulged in the same sense of liberation felt when removing a mascot costume.

(Damn. I thought the copied version used an HMD instead of a HUD. And it uses a smelly oxygen mask used by who knows who. Curse this outdated thing.)

It felt a lot like borrowing a damp judo or kendo *gi* from a stranger, but once again, she could not be picky. She put it on and continued her preparations.

“Oh, so you don’t have to lower the seat this time? Poo hoo hoo.”

“…If it wouldn’t take me with you, I’d pull the eject lever for that one. Why the hell is it always the most annoying people who survive the longest in a zombie outbreak?”

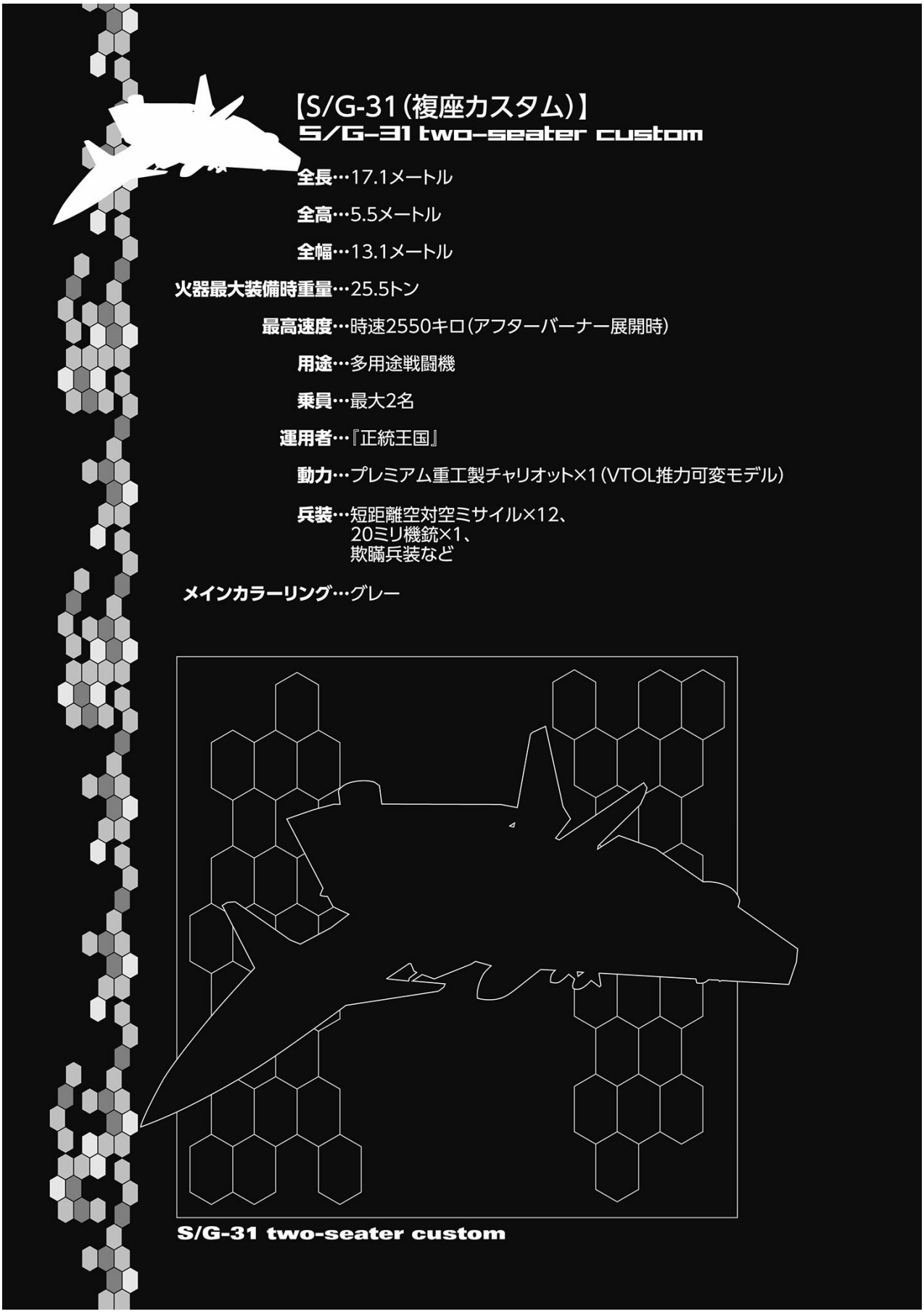
“Wait, it bothers you that much!?”

“It doesn’t bother me! I’m just irritated with your unfair assessment of the situation!!”

They bickered while Mariydi flicked various buttons and switches to continue their preparations. Sitting in a fighter really was the best. It calmed her down.

“Find some string or something to tie around your thighs.”

“Eh?”



“Without a g-suit, the inertial Gs will send the blood down to your feet and it

won't come back up. You won't have enough oxygen in your head and your brain cells will die."

"Eh? Eh? Is this your revenge on me or something?"

"It's just the truth."

Nancy shrieked and frantically got to work.

"If I ignore their CT's instructions and start to take off, they're sure to notice something's up. They'll catch us in a crossfire then, but…well, we just have to pray."

"Don't you have a better plan than thaaaat!?"

In the middle of the chaos, Mariydi made minute adjustments to the delta wing's flaps and ignited the jet engine. The poor, diligent damage control team that noticed something was wrong and approached from behind the fighter were blasted more than 5 meters back by the explosive flames. The control tower finally began to question them, but 30 seconds had passed since ignition and they were already moving at 250kph.

They were lucky there were no fire hoses lying across the runway.

The S/G-31 piloted by Mariydi broke through the black smoke and took off from the airbase.

"U-ugweeeeeehhh…"

"Feeling that invisible hand on your stomach already, huh? Vomit if you want, but take the mask off first. It's you who'll experience hell if you don't."

"What are we going to do now? Urp, surely they'll send someone after us…"

"I doubt anyone else will be taking off from that AB. Military weapons are all about procedure, procedure, procedure. With those zombies wandering around, they won't know who should submit the paperwork or who should sign it."

"F-fwee…"

Nancy sounded more like she was being slowly crushed by a clear panel of glass than experiencing motion sickness, but she would still be feeling somewhat relieved to have escaped that zombie outbreak. The breath contained a hint of the sigh after a job well done.

“H-ha-have you never wanted to live a normal liiife?”

“Sorry, but this is normal for me.”

“…”

However, nothing said they had escaped danger.

A glance at the radar screen showed a few dots rapidly approaching them.

“To get back on topic, the real danger is anyone who was already in the air to protect their air superiority. If we can shake them, we’ll have a nice safe trip through the sky.”

“H-h-ho-h-ho-how are you supposed to do thaaat?”

Instead of answering, Mariydi operated her handheld music player.

Deep notes permeated her entire body and filled her heart with energy.

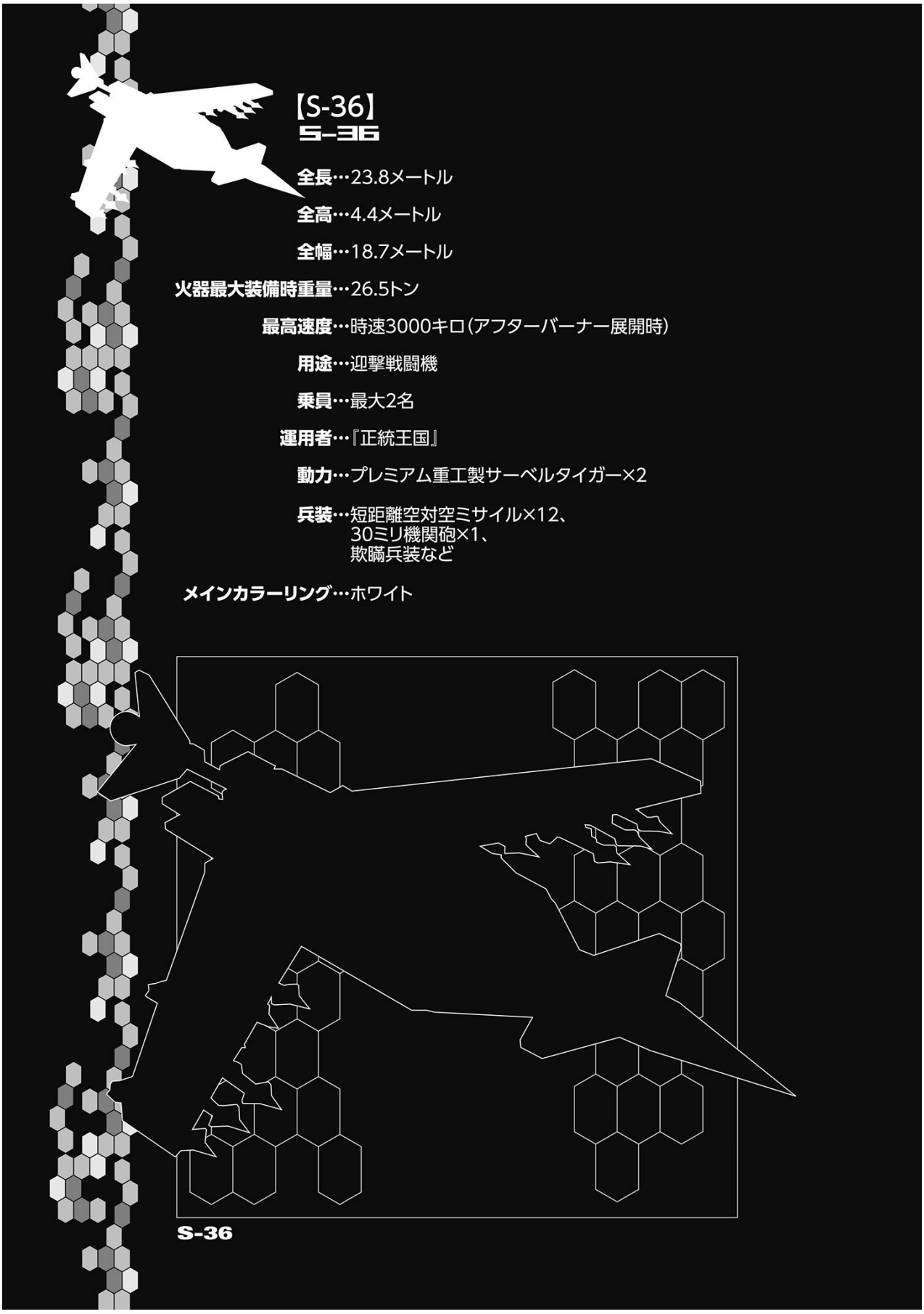
“Nothing beats rock at times like this.”

“…Uhehh.”

“Hey, why do you look so disgusted just seeing the player? Okay, I’ll teach you the true essence of Boy Racer. This is the masterpiece from their 4th album…”

“Noo, please don’t use this inescapable flying room as a chance to proselytiiiiize!”

“Punish Cross 1 to unknown. Punish Cross 1 to unknown. State your affiliation and assigned mission. We’ve received word about what’s going on down below. Even if you panicked and left your post, we will be as accommodating as possible. Follow our guidance and land at another AB.”



It was a 4-craft squadron of S-36 canards with forward-swept wings. They were

specialized for high-mobility combat. Normal aircraft had large main wings in the front that swept backwards and then smaller tail wings on the back, but this oddly-shaped fighter had main wings on the back that swept forwards. Its unique aerodynamic control allowed sharp turns that produced such high inertial Gs that it was known as “The Juicer”, but that meant it was an extremely tricky aircraft with a high risk of stalling or losing control if the pilot overdid it.

And Mariydi pouted her lips.

“Cheh. I should’ve grabbed one of those. This thing’s too average to be any fun.”

“U-umm… They seem to be right on our tail to meee.”

“Of course they are. Standard practice is to be all nice at first and then start yelling.”

“Punish Bullet 2 to unknown!! Don’t act spoiled! Don’t you know abandoning your mission and deserting under enemy fire is enough to get you shot!? Unless you want to expose the Northern Restricted Zone to the abnormal weather conditions of scrap metal and mincemeat rain, then obey our orders right this instant!!”

“After scolding their subordinate, they’ll count down to 0. Will they start from 3?”

“Stop it, Bullet 2. They’re one of the allies who have eaten bread and wine at the same table as us. But if they aren’t going to obey, we’ll have to lock onto them. We’ll give you a five count. Please do as we say.”

“Oh, 5 whole seconds? The Punish Squadron must care for their comrades.”

“5, 4…”

“I’ve heard talk of them. But they stick to defense missions deep in their own territory and barely join the real fun, so I haven’t had a chance to take them on directly.”

“…3, 2…”

With a ferocious smile, Mariydi flicked on the radio.

She could have stayed silent and attacked them, but she showed her respect for the enemy’s ace squadron.

She waited until the pause between one song and the next. And…

“This is Ice Girl 1. Show me a good time, Legitimacy Kingdom exorcists!!”

Mariydi suddenly pulled back on the control column to pitch the nose straight up, catching air resistance with the entire aircraft. It rapidly decelerated and the Punish Squadrons’ canards with forward-swept wings passed right by them and overshot them.

This was a special maneuver known as the Pugachev’s Cobra.

Dogfights between fighters basically came down to a fight over taking a position behind the enemy. This was a world where going for anyone who carelessly showed their tail was standard practice. Mariydi enjoyed the pleasant stimulation of the deep notes passing through her body and focused her mind.

(2 of them overshot and the other 2 are still behind me. But we’re nice and close!)

“Attack Alpha.”

The HUD’s tactical information placed boxes over the 2 S-36s.

It was not difficult for modern fighters to lock onto multiple targets at once. A different guide pursued each enemy craft. The enemies were lined up in a straight line so soon over overshooting her, so the two displays soon settled in place.

“U-umm, concentrating on things up front is all well and good, but what about behind usss!? They’re right on our tailll!!”

(That’s why you need to let me focus, you idiot!!)

“Attack Beta.”

When the 2 displays surrounded the targets, the frames changed from green to red. That meant the lock was complete. Pressing the red button on top of the control column would fire air-to-air missiles (AAM).

“Eek! Eeeeek!?”

Several orange lines shot right past them, overshooting them. The 2 fighters behind them were firing their machine guns. They must not have been trying to hit her right away. They intended to restrict her movements so they could get a proper lock.

“An alarm is blaring! What does that mean!? Did we get hit somewherrrre!?”

(So they have Defense Beta. I don’t have much time!!)

“Attack Charlie.”

Mariydi grimaced at the rude warning buzzer intruding on the hard rock and she accurately moved her fingertips. The AAMs loaded on the S/G-31 were Ballista IIs. They were known as “fire and forget” which meant she did not have to keep track of them after launching them. After firing the necessary missiles, Mariydi scattered flares from the tail wings like horse dung and began a sharp turn.

“Attack Delta: Strike 2.”

The 2 S-36s of the Punish Squadron in front of her (she did not know which ones those were) blossomed like fiery flowers in the sky. She had been too focused on shooting them down to take evasive actions, so the remaining 2 had a complete lock on her and had already fired their missiles.

But the blown up and scattered Legitimacy Kingdom fighters were swept backwards by intense air resistance. The wreckage struck the missiles fired by the surviving S-36s and continued back toward their comrades who had sworn revenge on Mariydi. Their special alloy fuselages were torn apart like someone taking a machete to a thin aluminum can.

Page 242 of the Capitalist Corporations Pilot Training Manual said the following: *The closer you are in a dogfight, the easier it is for your attacks to hit. But if you are within 3000m of the enemy, be wary of the fragments and wreckage of the destroyed aircraft.*

“Accident: Strike 1.”

“Ugh. That’s quite the smug look on your face there, but the other one surviiived!!”

“So you noticed? This is going to get a little rough.”

“Ahhhh, I shouldn’t have said thaaaaaat!!!!!”

She spun the fighter like a screw and then made a deep and sharp turn. Perhaps as a sign of chivalry, whoever it was contacted her over the radio.

“Punish Cross 1 to unknown…”

“Call me Ice Girl 1.”

“I understand your intentions. And I’ll increase your weight by about 20 kilos to allow my lost men to rest in peace. And by that I mean I’ll be killing you by firing 20 kilos worth of bullets into you. I’ll leave it up to you to calculate out how many

that is…!!”

“How about you try using that overheated head of yours? Fire at someone that much with a 30mm gun and they’ll lose weight. Even their bones will be blown to pieces. Here, I’ll show you what it’s like.”

That casual exchange acted as a signal.

They began flying in S-shapes to get behind each other. They did not make full comma-shaped circuits because Mariydi had a destination.

“We’re just not a good match, you murderer!!” shouted Punish Cross 1.

“Sorry, but I don’t like it from behind or 69.”

But Mariydi was at a disadvantage given the situation. As said before, dogfights were all about taking a position behind the enemy. When the enemy was already behind you, they naturally had an advantage. Also, Punish Cross 1’s S-36 was specialized for high-mobility to the point that it ignored safety. The S/G-31 was almighty in both anti-surface and anti-air, but it was very generic. The difference in specs made it hard to lose him even with her skill. If they flew in the same curving motion, there would be a difference in their turn radius. It was a lot like trying to escape a racecar in a heavy dump truck.

“Geh! Gweh!?”

“Hey, don’t burp. This is a sealed cockpit.”

“But…gweh, gheh…more importantly! Aren’t we in trouble? It’s beeping again!!”

The beeping of course meant they were exposed to the enemy’s radar. That alone did not mean he had a lock, but it was only a matter of time before the lock was complete. Mariydi wiggled her tail back and forth while fleeing to delay it, but that would only last so long.

“I know that. Just another 45 seconds.”

“Is that how long until we diiie!?”

“What are you talking about? Whenever a pilot says something in the air, it’s always about life or death. This is my job.”

“Gyaaahh!!”

The glasses fried shrimp was screaming something, but Mariydi had never really

been paying any attention to her.

(I'm impressed she's lasted this long without a g-suit. Tying strings around her thighs isn't really all that effective. And it would honestly be quieter and easier to work if she'd just blackout already.)

"Ah, this silence… You're thinking something I wouldn't like, aren't you!?"

"No, I'm honestly impressed. It turns out masochism is a kind of talent."

Then the promised time arrived.

With the control column in hand, Mariydi clicked her tongue over multiple alarms.

"Defense Beta."

"What does that mean!? Can't you speak English like a normal persooon!?"

"What language do you think 'defense' and 'beta' are!?"

Simply put, that meant the enemy had a proper lock, but she decided not to explain that since it would only cause the fried shrimp to go nuts in the cockpit.

But Mariydi had not been fleeing randomly.

From the beginning, they had been flying in S-shapes to get on each other's tail. They had not been flying around and around in comma-shaped half-circles. …That had prevented her from making any especially bold actions, but she had of course had a reason worth accepting that handicap.

"Ice Girl 1 to all."

She flicked on the radio switch and spoke in a singsong voice.

"I'm back, Ice Squadron."

They were right in front of her.

The instant she entered Capitalist Corporations airspace, 3 very familiar Zig-27s charged right toward her. The AAMs flying out ahead of them cut right past Mariydi's fighter with trails of smoke behind them.

This never could have happened under normal circumstances, but pilots could easily lose sight of direction and distance when making constant sharp turns to the left and right in pursuit of the enemy in front of their eyes. This was especially

true for a small one-man fighter like the S-36 when it had no supporters and the surface CT was too busy with a zombie outbreak to provide any advice. The blood must have rushed to his head too much for him to carefully observe his map or radar. Just like a racehorse with a carrot dangling in front of its eyes. When semi-active, missiles could make a lock even if the radar waves did not hit the enemy until after the missiles were fired, so it was hard to detect them in advance.

"…!!!???"

Punish Cross 1 did not provide a death cry.

There was only a gasp that could oddly be interpreted as both regretful and envious.

Immediately afterwards, the leader of Punish Squadron, who had lost his companions to Mariydi's deception, was blown up in midair by Ice Squadron who were supported by many comrades. There was no sign of him bailing out. Had he been unable, or had he chosen not to? Members of another squadron working with them were one thing, but Mariydi had never once had one of her own squadron shot down in front of her eyes, so she could not know the answer to that question.

"…Red target strike confirmed."

The girl rested back in her seat and crossed herself just once. She had no interest in the Faith Organization's ways, but she showed her respect with a purifying cross.

But…

"U-u-umm…"

"What?"

"About those Capitalist Corporation Zig-27s. Aren't they taking up position right behind us? Just like those previous fighters?"

The fried shrimp fidgeted in her seat.

"Uh, that isn't because we're in a Legitimacy Kingdom fighter and they think we're an enemy, is it?"

"If so, they would've blown us out of the sky on the initial pass. We might not be sending out an IFF, but the radio was playing my voice with a Boy Racer masterpiece in the background. My squadron would know it's me."

“Heh, eh heh heh. That’s right. You had it all figured out from the beginning, right!?”

“I did. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Ohhhh, well that’s a relief. Ah hah hah!!”

“Yeah, once we get back, I need to take a bath while sipping on an ice-cold soda. The ones in a small bottle are nice. Makes me feel like a celebrity.”

The two of them laughed together for a while longer.

Until, that is, a regular gun mercilessly fired at them from behind.

Track 07: Last, Lust, Lost

Mariydi had been fully convinced the battle was over, so she had to frantically grab the control column once more. Several alarms activated as she did so. She was being hit by radar waves from her own Ice Squadron.

Even with a Boy Racer masterpiece permeating her body, she could not stop sweating from tension.

They were not locking onto her in order to demand she make a forced landing (FL). In that case, they would have sent a warning before beginning the lock. Besides, her own squadron would have no reason to order an FL.

“See, I told yooouuu!!”

“Shut up!! …This can’t be happening!! Why would my own squadron be after my tail!?”

“Urp. Maybe they have a lot of frustration to take out on you from the way you treat them on a daily basis…”

“Do you want me to fire right back at you!?”

Mariydi was confused, but she twisted her fighter around for a sharp turn.

Could they not trust her because she was flying an enemy fighter? Or were they now working for whoever was offering the 50 billion dollars? Speculation raced through her mind, but none of it was very convincing. The current situation simply did not add up with her view of her squadron.

(What the hell is going on!?)

“Ice Girl 1 to all, Ice Girl 1 to all!! It’s me!! Do I need to read off the number engraved in my dog tags!?”

She opened the radio and shouted at them, but there was no response.

More lines of tracer rounds pursued her and gradually took away her freedom of movement. If she was captured by the inertial G limit, her movements would simplify and they would complete a lock. She could not escape.

(What would get them to turn against me?)

Even so, this was the focus of Mariydi's mind.

(Were their friends or lovers taken hostage? Are they getting an extra bonus for shooting me down? Is there some kind of just cause they can't complete without shooting me down? No, none of that would explain this. These are the idiots who ignored the BtB order and kept flying around so they could demand a search for me. If they're willing to go that far, some threats or temptation now aren't going to change their resolve.)

In that case, what was it?

What possible reason could the rest of Ice Squadron have to try so persistently to shoot her down?

"…I see. So that's it."

"???"

"So those idiots still want to fly with me."

"How did you reach that conclusion? They're ganging up on us right nowww!!"

"That's the point!!" Mariydi was a little annoyed that Nancy did not understand. "They're trying to gain the trust of the higher ups by turning on me and shooting me down. That way they can continue their own investigation from within the organization. And if they let another squadron handle this mission, they'd probably pretend they never heard my transmissions and claim they only took out a Legitimacy Kingdom crew!"

"…"

"Since those idiots were the first ones here, they must have the most accurate information. Enough to keep up the fight against the higher ups behind this conspiracy!"

Whether or not they could actually get the price removed from her head, it meant a lot to know she had people on her side. She could not put her squadron in danger.

So…

"…Fine, then. I'll let you shoot me down."

“Whaaat!? Wh-what did you say just n-n-nowww!?”

No matter what anyone might say, Mariydi was the one holding the control column, so she began a quick descent. In a by-the-book response, 2 of the “enemies” pursued her and 1 remained above to cut off her ascent. Now Mariydi’s only option was to weave her way through the precipitous mountains. If she sped up, she would slam into a mountain. If she slowed down in fear, the pursuing Zig-27s would shoot her down with a missile. But if she moved up, she would expose her tail to the other fighter.

It was an ideal pursuit for them.

Of course, they would never do it in a real battle because it was too easy to predict.

As the radar exposure buzzer rang, Mariydi made a decision with such a carefree attitude she could have been humming.

“This area looks good.”

“Wait! No! You’re kidding, riiight!?”

It was obvious what was making the fried shrimp protest.

There was a gaping hole in the green mountain surface.

“That’s an abandoned tunnel.”

This was actually less difficult than landing on an aircraft carrier. Just after Mariydi’s S/G-31 flew cleanly inside with the same motion used to descend toward a runway, 2 AAMs fired from directly behind her produced brilliant blossoms of flame at the entrance.

Her dot had vanished from the radar, but CT would pick her up again if she simply flew out the other end of the tunnel. So Mariydi brought the 3 wheels out from the bottom of the fuselage and forcibly began the usual landing motion inside the tunnel.

With a dull bursting noise, the nose tilted downwards.

“Wah, wah, wahhh!!”

“Tch. I was afraid I’d blow a tire. Hey, fried shrimp, we’ll make it somehow, so don’t piss yourself.”

A great din followed as if a thick piece of metal were being worn down by an electric grinder. The trail of sparks would have looked beautiful from the outside.

Fighters were generally towed around, so they were not built to make turns on the ground under their own power like a car. But the S/G-31 was equipped with VTOL functionality. Making minute adjustments to the direction of the boosters allowed for minor changes of direction similar to operating a steering wheel.

To be blunt, not even a professional pilot had any use for this skill.

Lastly, there was only a scant 40cm between the tilted delta wings and the tunnel walls.

But Mariydi successfully pulled off the landing without batting an eye and then she popped the canopy.

There was no access ladder for climbing down, but she was pretty close to the ground thanks to blowing the front tire. She tossed aside the helmet, pulled out the handmade ghillie suit she had placed below her butt so it would be out of the way, retrieved her handheld music player, and hopped down to the cracked ground of the abandoned tunnel.

“What should we do with this thing? Take it to the exit and blow it up? No, any weird camouflage would only look unnatural when they inspect the scene. Even if they do send in a ground unit to check things out, it would be best to leave it like this. That way it looks like Ice Squadron turned on me, but I was just better than them.”

“E-eek. So what was all that about?”

“Whatever the case, we’re back to moving on foot.”

With that, Mariydi put the ghillie suit on over her head to cover her lemon yellow special suit.

She tried thinking calmly about what she needed to do.

…First of all, she still had the flight recorder the villains wanted. The encrypted data there was the villains’ Achilles’ heel, so she wanted that data if at all possible.

But she would need a supercomputer-level machine to decrypt it. Needless to say, Mariydi did not have access to one of those while wandering around after being shot down.

That said, she could not just return to her AB either. Ice Squadron had put on an act to buy time for investigation, so she could not reveal her presence so easily.

So…

“We need to head to somewhere with a large enough machine to decrypt it on our own. That’s probably the best option.”

“Fine, but how exactly do we do thaaat…?”

“Hm.”

She could think of plenty of options when it came to supercomputer-level machines. That list would include things like the data link exchanges that processed tens of thousands of soldiers’ communications or the machines that processed anti-air radar networks. Looking back at the origins of the internet revealed it had begun as an experiment in military communications infrastructure, so this was hardly surprising. Modern battlefields were as overrun by electromagnetic signals as California and all of its risky free wi-fi.

But those large communication processing facilities would be full of guards.

Not even Mariydi wanted to bring too large a fight to the other good (or good*ish*) soldiers of the Capitalist Corporations. That could easily become a betrayal of the trust Ice Squadron had put in her.

She thought for a bit.

“Anything’s fine as long as we have access to a machine. A facility without any guards would be best.”

“Where are we supposed to find something like that?”

“We just have to borrow some equipment abandoned by the military.”

“Don’t they normally take any important equipment when they withdraw?”

That was true. It would be odd for them to leave behind a machine full of classified information, plus this was the Capitalist Corporations. They would not waste a single cent if they could avoid it, so they would never abandon a major computer system.

However.

“Things change when it’s something they can’t take back with them even if they

wanted to." Mariydi winked. "For example, what about a destroyed cruiser that ran aground on a reef? I doubt they could drag something that heavy away."

It was the 5th Argo-class battlecruiser.

The Faith Organization's prized Naglfar had originally used its great speed and thick armor to form the foundation of transport ship defense. As that would suggest, it had been built with a focus on anti-submarine abilities to destroy the hounds used for commerce raiding. It had generally left air support to a separate squadron of escort aircraft. Its Gatling-style CIWS control was truly exceptional. It had been half-deified after it avoided any friendly damage by simultaneously shooting down 6 large anti-ship missiles (AShM) as they skimmed along the ocean surface after being fired from a submarine.

"On the other hand, when the escort squadron screwed up, they were wiped out like fish in a barrel. It's not their fault our Ice Squadron finished them off with aerial bombs. The Naglfar's crew, from the captain on down, fought bravely to the end. Enough so that we had to put in some overtime for free."

That was a Capitalist Corporations form of praise.

After walking to the coast, they saw something rising up from the chilly fjord like a small island. It was the aforementioned grounded battlecruiser. 3 months had passed since its defeat and it had become quite a home for seabirds, but it had not lost its former majesty.

"But how are we supposed to get there?"

"It's only 3 kilometers, so we can swim it."

"No, we cannot!! Besides, have you forgotten we're in Scandinavia!?"

The grown-up fried shrimp clung to the hips of a 12-year-old girl and threw a fit as Mariydi strolled along the beach. The Northern Restricted Zone was a constant battlefield, so soldiers were instructed to carry back any equipment containing classified information, but it was not uncommon to find unimportant equipment like ammunition or small guns lying around. They would of course be destroyed before they were abandoned, but gathering the undamaged pieces from multiple copies of the same equipment allowed one to create a single functioning version.

Yes.

And that included the military rubber motor boats abandoned after making a

landing.

“They really shouldn’t be leaving them with gas still inside. One of them could blow up and take out a kid or old person gathering shell cartridges to make some money.”

With that comment, Mariydi and Nancy boarded a boat and set off. They arrived at the battlecruiser with little difficulty, but the deck was about 9 meters up from the very bottom of the hull. And the sides curved outwards, so it was worse than purely vertical.

“Wh-what do we do now?”

“Use our arms and legs to climb up.”

“By now I’ve figured out you’re a crazy super soldier hopped up on protein and steroids, but can you please lower this to a difficulty level a normal human can manage!?”

Mariydi had no choice but to find a rope floating nearby, toss it up so it caught on the railing, and then climb up that. The fried shrimp could not manage even with the rope, so she had to tie it around herself and let Mariydi pull her up.

“Bghh…!! I-I’m…I’m going to break wind…!?”

“You…really are…a natural at being…a burden!”

Once they had both arrived on the deck, they got to work.

Once they were inside, Nancy was much more carefree.

“Hm, hm, hm, hm, hm, hmmm☆”

“What’s that for? It’s creeping me out.”

“Well, an abandoned warship at least won’t have any enemy soldiers in it, right? Ahh, safety is the ultimate luxuryyy. I can finally relaaax…”

“…Um, an abandoned warship will have lots of explosives and fuel left inside and it could be set off at any moment with everything rusting over due to lack of maintenance. Why don’t you understand that we’re essentially exploring a 250-meter piece of unexploded ordnance?”

A scream echoed through the empty ship, but there was nothing they could do now.

Plus, the 5th Argo-class was known for its high-precision anti-submarine sonar and CIWS. That meant it had to be equipped with a largescale computer system. On the way to the engine room (ER), Mariydi could only pray it had not been disposed of with incendiary grenades or something when evacuating.

“Wouldn’t the computer be on the bridge or CIC?”

“It’s been 3 months since the ship was abandoned, so the batteries will be dead. We need to start up the engine to secure power.”

But of course…

“This ship was grounded after taking 16 aerial bombs. Who can say where the wiring was severed in the walls, so there’s a risk of electrical fires. As I said, warships are crammed full of explosives and fuel and we’re in real trouble if a fire reaches them. Prepare yourself.”

“Does this country not have any save points in it?”

They were in the Northern Restricted Zone, so adrenaline was a constant companion. If you wanted to rest easy, you were SOL.

After opening the thick metal door to the ER in the very bottom of the ship’s stern, Mariydi opened a few valves and breathed new life into the ship’s long-stopped heart. For the time being, the ship was not torn in two by an explosion. She breathed a sigh of relief and started toward the bridge.

“Hell yes. Did they not realize their incineration had failed to activate?”

She removed the ghillie suit from her head and grabbed the superficially scorched flight recorder.

“If the computer is functioning, we can use it for the decryption. It shouldn’t take long if we have it ignore its usual duties and dedicate all of its machine power toward the one task.”

Machines larger than refrigerators lined the wall and she only had to use a specialized cable to attach the recorder to one of them and then give the command. However…

“Nn…”

“?”

“…Nnnhh???”

Mariydi let out a hysteric voice for once, so the glasses fired shrimp gave her a confused look.

She was stretching upwards.

She was really forcing herself.

With her back to the fried shrimp, Mariydi stood on her toes, stretched her back, and reached her slender hand as high up as it would go…but she could not reach. That 12-year-old cool beauty simply could not reach the necessary slot.

And the fried shrimp felt like this was the first time in a long while she had laughed from the gut.

“Pff. Heh heh. You’re so tiny. So very tiny.”

“N-no, I can reach it!! I can reach it just fine!!”

She ended up hopping up and down as well, but she could not make up for her insufficient height.

Nancy’s index finger stroked up along the back of her skintight suit.

“Young laaady?”

“Hyahh!?”

“Rome wasn’t built in a day. You should probably drink more milk.”

“Cough, cough! Hearing that from those breasts really pisses me off!!”

“Yes, yes. This is where you need to stick that, right?”

Nancy pressed up against Mariydi’s back, took the recorder, and rested her large breasts atop the small girl’s head while trying to help, but…

“No! Don’t take this chance from me! I haven’t lost yet!!”

“Oh, honestly. Then let’s do this.”

The fried shrimp lowered her hands, grabbed Mariydi by her tiny hips, and then lifted her up like a small child.

The slot was right in front of Mariydi’s face, but she fell oddly quiet.

"…"

"What's the matter, widdle girrrl? Hurry up and finish helping out the grownups, okayyy?"

Mariydi connected the flight recorder and computer with a cable while feeling a sense of defeat greater than any she had previously experienced.

At the cost of considerable pride, the analysis work finally began.

The blonde girl tearfully puffed out her cheeks and refused to look her companion in the eye.

"Such humiliation… If I was from the Island Nation, I'd commit harakiri…"

"Everything's going well, so you should be happy."

"And how long are you going to keep this up!? Put me down already!! Hey, are you even listening!? Don't gently shake me up and down!!"

That was how they spent the wait time.

Nancy seemed to see this as her chance to take revenge.

"Good girl, good girl. Look how high you are!"

"…I find it hard to believe you were shot through the arm. What kind of endorphins are your brain putting out, you pessimistic woman!?"

However.

As far as Mariydi could tell, most of the Naglfar's equipment was still in working order. If they had not had the misfortune of running aground on the reef, it might have been able to continue the battle. As a participant in that naval battle, Mariydi felt a chill.

"Looks like it found something."

"Hm."

Mariydi had assumed she would find a conversation between the villains.

But this was something else.

The result being displayed on one of the bridge's many monitors was not even

human language.

“…16 alphanumeric characters?”

She doubted the actual content of the string was meaningful and Nancy the glasses fried shrimp tilted her head as she muttered another possibility.

“Hmm, is it some kind of password?”

“…Wait a minute.”

That rang a bell.

“This uses the numbers from 0 to 9 and only the letters from A to S. And it’s 16 characters long… Oh, damn. I’ve heard of this. It’s a detonation code sent out by high-ranking military officers.”

“Wh-what for…?”

“For the JPlevelMHD reactors they install in Objects. It’s a failsafe used to finish off a Pilot Elite that disobeys orders and goes on a rampage.”

Mariydi frowned despite being the one to mention it.

Transmitting it by radio was fine, but where was there an Object reactor in the Northern Restricted Zone? Objects could not be directly used in Mariydi’s workplace. That was why it was known as a restricted zone. That would make a reactor completely useless.

“No.”

Something sounded familiar about this. It was on the tip of her tongue. Where had it been? She had seen something related to Objects in the Northern Restricted Zone. Something more accurately referred to as the scars of one.

Where had it been?

What form had it taken?

“That’s it…”

“Hmm?”

“The Lævateinn. The Legitimacy Kingdom’s Lævateinn combat train.” Mariydi brought a hand to her small chin. “It was stuck in that dead city. The poor city of

Asgard buried an Object reactor in the middle of their city, claiming it was for peaceful purposes, but they also built a powerful anti-air network of powerful cannons around the city and got blown away along with the reactor thanks to concentrated fire. That Object in the form of a city is what made the Northern Restricted Zone a restricted zone!! We saw that ourselves, didn't we!?"

"B-but what does that matter? Asgard was turned into a giant crater long ago, so there is no reactor there. I doubt anyone would care about a detonation code for it now."

That was true, but it still bothered her.

Since she had recovered the flight recorder and exposed its contents, she could review the entirety of her past conversations. She did not remember the details of the unimportant banter with her squadron, so she made a search of the necessary keyword on the voice data of her old conversations.

And she knew exactly what term to use.

"Search for Asgard."

The flight recorder had to record everything said during a mission, so the recordings could not be divided into small files. A few pins appeared at the corresponding times within the single long recording.

(…?)

One of them was in the interval just before being shot down and before protecting her wingmen from the light and explosions of the Thor's Hammer.

She selected that one and played it. She heard her own voice which sounded almost unrecognizable when played back through the machine.

"But they have to be insane to create a second Asgard now. History must be weeping."

"It's the Divided City, so what're you gonna do? It's controlled by the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance, right? This is probably another form of deterrence."

"I get that, but they're burying the reactor right in the middle of the city. Aren't the people afraid to live in a place like that?"

"Don't worry. It won't blow up."

It had been nothing more than a casual chat over the flight radio.

They had probably been flying above that city on the way to their next MA.

Her own nearly unrecognizable voice continued.

“Basically, they’ve intentionally created a situation where the ocean side and the mountain side are holding each other in check by holding the detonation switch, right? That political nonsense about mutual respect is ridiculous. Just thinking about it makes my stomach clench.”

“…”

“…”

Mariydi and Nancy exchanged a glance.

The glasses fried shrimp put on an obviously stiff smile.

“Th-th-that detonation code has leaked out, hasn’t iiit!? Now a third party can blow up the city whenever they waaaant!!!”

“So that’s why the villains want to kill me even if it means spending 50 billion.” Mariydi slapped her forehead and sighed. “The Divided City is Valhalla on the southern end of the Northern Restricted Zone, right? That city of a million has made a lot of money in trade and finances by piling up a bunch of dirt to create a mountain range that makes them the sole entrance connecting the Northern Restricted Zone to Eastern Europe. They used all the dirt leftover after building the nearby mines and harbor. Due to a territorial dispute, the single city is currently managed by both the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance. It might be called a benevolent barrier, but they’ve stacked up a veritable cliff of metal containers and tanks to divide the city down the center. And they’re all only known as presents on the official paperwork.”

“Wh-wh-when did they bring a reactor in?”

“Who knows. The Information Alliance on the mountain side does things the Northern Restricted Zone way, but the Capitalist Corporations by the ocean leans more toward the European safe country format. They might have needed to switch power generation methods to meet the requirements for some recent carbon dioxide output restrictions.”

“Why would someone try to blow up Valhalla…?”

“That’s a mystery. It could be ideological terrorism for bringing an Object into the

restricted zone, or it might somehow earn enough money to make it worth paying 50 billion dollars for me. It's too soon to say anything much." Mariydi spun around her raised index finger. "But the villains secretly transmitting the detonation code to a city of a million aren't just a terrorist organization. They're an ultranationalist organization with deep roots in the four world powers. This isn't something you could pull off by thinking it up on the spot."

The detonation code itself was periodically changed and it could be immediately swapped out with another code in case of an emergency. Thus, a single code was only good for a limited time. That ruled out the possibility of using the code to gradually threaten a politician for money over time.

If this exchange had happened, someone was definitely planning to blow the Divided City of Valhalla to smithereens. And they would have to do so while the code was active, which meant quite soon.

"U-u-umm! Oh, right. What if we report this and have them change the detonation code!?"

"We could always send them a message along with the 16 alphanumeric characters, but would the message actually reach the politician in charge? Whoever is behind this is deep inside the 4 world powers. If one of them is located anywhere between the contact point and the politician, they can make the message disappear."

And that deception only had to last the few days until the actual detonation. They knew they did not have to keep the secret forever, so they could use some very forceful methods.

"Th-then what about the worldwide web!? We can scatter it all across the globe so they can't hide it!!"

"You want everyone in the world to know the 16-character detonation code? From that moment on, you would never know when someone would set it off as a prank. Well, assuming it's connected to the normal internet anyway."

The busty glasses girl tearfully shook her hands in distress.

They could not rely on anyone else. To be certain, they had to do it themselves.

And so…

"The problem now is that we still don't know what the villains are after. What do they hope to gain by blowing up a city of a million? If we could figure that out, I

bet we'd have a better idea of who we're dealing with here."

"How are we supposed to figure that out? They're like hidden phantoms, so we can't just grab them and ask them."

"Yeah. And if the culprits are off limits, then we'll have to go with the victims."

"Eh? You mean…?"

"Let's head to the Divided City of Valhalla and see what the locals have to say."

"No, let's not!! I absolutely refuse to sneak into a city that could be blown up by an out-of-control reactor at any moment!! Please leave me herrrre!!"

"Y'know, checking over the logs for this computer will tell anyone interested that you learned this secret with me here. That means you're the same as me: killing you is worth 50 billion dollars. What do you hope to accomplish by heading back to a Capitalist Corporations base with no means of fighting back? You'll just end up the victim of a hit-and-run or an unnatural hanging."

"Uuh."

"And since we started the engine, a satellite investigation of carbon dioxide distribution will quickly reveal something's up with the Naglfar. Not to mention the unnatural flight of the seabirds. You can stay if you want, but the villains will be the first ones here. Well, it is a large ship. If you're confident in your hide-and-seek skills, I won't stop you."

"Waaahh!!"

The fried shrimp held her head in her hands, but it was too late.

There were no safe-and-sound fluffy beds in the Northern Restricted Zone.

Track 08: Night City

The Northern Restricted Zone was an intense battlefield, so there were damaged guns and burned-out tanks everywhere. It made sense that the local children would come to gather scrap metal. After returning to land with the boat, Mariydi used her knife to slit the throats of some soldiers who had left their unit to cook up some insane rock candy. She borrowed the key to their four-wheel drive truck. They were from the Capitalist Corporations, but she felt no need to show any mercy.

“It sounds fine and all when you explain it all in order, but I would need both hands to count all the corpses lying around herrre…eeeek!”

“There’s something wrong with the world when they can freely experiment with that stuff just by using ingredients for explosives and a container lab. There are three things I have no patience for whatsoever: red meat that wasn’t prepared right, kids who kick the elderly in the back, and that stuff. Besides, that stuff was more than half the reason Boy Racer fell apart. It pisses me off so much.”

They boarded the truck they had acquired. Wearing the ghillie suit inside a vehicle was meaningless, so she removed it from her head and placed it below her butt.

And then it was that time again.

“Oh, I won’t say anything this time, okay? You need to adjust the seat, right? Don’t worry, don’t worry. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Yes, I’ll just look the other way.”

“Don’t be so understanding. It just makes me sadder.”

“Wow, young lady, your legs are so looong! Your back is so preeeetty! I’m so jealousss!”

“Now it just sounds like you’re mocking me!!”

“Ow, ow, ow!! You’re the one that said not to be so understanding!!”

They pulled off the headrests to the driver and passenger seat and began pummeling each other in something like a somewhat harder pillow fight. Mariydi seemed to have the advantage by about 8-to-2.

“B-buhii. There’s no way I can beat you. Buhihi.”

“Hey, pig. You should probably aim for being a cow with that excess fat. And I’ve been wondering: why do you pick fights when you know you’re going to lose? Are you one of those women who think the commander of a losing army is romantic?”

Having mechanically worked off some stress by moving her body a bit, Mariydi finally adjusted the seat to match her height.

When Mariydi connected her music player to the stereo with practiced hand, Nancy gave a disgusted look from the passenger seat.

“We have to listen to the same song agaaaiiin?”

“This is the heavy remix re-edited by the vocalist’s wife!! There’s something wrong with you if you can’t tell the difference!”

They had a vehicle, but it would still take time to reach the Divided City of Valhalla since it was on the southern end of the Northern Restricted Zone. Mariydi sighed while passing a group of Capitalist Corporations armored trucks going the other way.

“That was probably the villains. Looks like they’re on their way to investigate the battlecruiser.”

“Eek!!”

“I’ve been wondering: can’t you cry in a cuter way? But anyway, I doubt we would learn anything by attacking the actual soldiers on the ground.”

Regardless, driving through Capitalist Corporations territory felt nice. As the hard rock ruled the truck, the fried shrimp looked down to the radio that could pick up normal broadcasts.

“U-u-umm. Aren’t you curious what they’re saying on the news?”

“The Northern Restricted Zone is in the middle of a war, so they aren’t going to mention a few bodies lying around. And I’m not interested in the false accusations the villains have cooked up to escape responsibility. All I need to know is they’re after me for some reason or another.”

With that, Mariydi began a true bandit-style feast of stuffing her mouth with the vacuum-packed rations found in the dashboard. The food belonged to people who were now corpses, so the fried shrimp did not feel hungry.

The standard Capitalist Corporations rations were something like a cold hamburger steak squished beneath someone's boot heel. But it still tasted fine and was a world better than the Legitimacy Kingdom's mystery food that was something like flavorless soap. Mariydi personally liked the Information Alliance's rations best. Why did she know so much about this? Because she had swiped food from the enemy soldiers she had killed, of course.

"At least drink a sports drinks."

"I'm not sure I caaan."

But despite her human complaints, Nancy too was devouring the rations after about an hour into the drive. It would seem animals could not fight their biological urges.

By the time they arrived near the Divided City, the sun had set and stars twinkled in the night sky.

The city in question was surrounded by the ocean and the precipitous mountains it had built itself, so there was only one path in for a vehicle. It was something like an artificial fortress. If they were to fortify it with stationary firepower as Asgard had, they would probably install cannons on the mountain peaks and run high-voltage lines below the slopes.

"The entire city is apparently arranged in a donut shape. The middle is supposedly taken up by a 2km-wide Sacred Forest."

"…Hmm?"

"It scares me that I'm getting used to that. Anyway, they say that forest has been there since before Norse mythology was exterminated by a massive religion. It's what you call a pillar of culture, but I hear the benevolent barrier of containers and tanks runs right through it."

"The center…of the city."

"If there is a reactor, my money's on there. But I still want some objective evidence."

Why had Mariydi brought this up while holding the steering wheel?

If she had started with the real topic at hand, the fried shrimp might have panicked, so she had thinned out the information as if hiding a tree in the forest.

"If we're going to enter the city from the Northern Restricted Zone end, we'll be

on the Information Alliance side. We're enemy soldiers, so the residents will gang up on us if we're discovered. They don't obey the treaties concerning POWs, so they'll make us regret being born women. Be careful."

"W-w-w-wait! But we're wearing Capitalist Corporations uniforrrms!"

Nancy spoke up in a panic, but even as they drove up to the gate in a military truck, the Information Alliance soldiers did not question them all that much. After a few questions about the purpose of their visit, the metal claws of the spike lock retracted into the road and they were waved on into the city.

"Eh? Eh? Fwehhh?"

"As I suspected, there's a complete mix of equipment from both militaries. Is there a black market for things stolen on the battlefield? …More importantly, be careful about how you speak. They'll start getting suspicious if we use the standard Capitalist Corporations language."

It was divided now, but it had been a single city originally. Unlike the soldiers posted there, the actual residents may not have seen a real difference between Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance.

Mariydi found a convenient pay parking lot and drove the truck over to it. She stopped in front of the lowered bar at the entrance and reached out the window for the automatic ticket machine, but…

"And…hm? Dammit…!"

"Can you not reach?"

"Of course I can. I just have to…ah, hell. Who designed this thing!?"

"You're so tiny. Poo hoo hoo. You're just so all-around tiny."

"Shut the hell up! A perfect lady like me won't be foiled by something like this!!"

Whoever had designed it, they had clearly not expected a 12-year-old girl to be driving a giant military truck, but a grin filled the fried shrimp's eyes as she watched Mariydi stretching her arm out as far as it would go to reach the ticket machine from the adult-sized window.

Hers were the eyes of someone who was enjoying this far too much to lend a helping hand.

And once Mariydi finally got pissed, she stomped violently on the gas pedal with

the clutch still disengaged.

“Do you want me to drive right through the damn bar!? That’d probably be easier, so it’s sounding like a good idea!!”

“Wah, wah! Okay, okay! I’ll grab the ticket!!”

The fried shrimp hopped out from the passenger side and pulled out the scrap of paper sticking out of the boxy machine like a tongue. Thus, a chaotic action movie scene was avoided.

“Here you go, widdle girl. Have some candyyy.”

“Dammit… The world keeps throwing so much crap at me that I feel like I’ve dropped down to the level of a cat or dog people consider to be family.”

After stopping in a random parking spot and retrieving her music player, Mariydi set foot in Valhalla. She carried the ghillie suit with her, but there was no need to wear it. Even if the sign said it was a cultural metropolis, this was still the Northern Restricted Zone, so no one panicked when seeing a young girl carrying around a carbine. The insanity of the place actually helped them here.

But no matter how comfortable it might be, they could not stay long since a third party could blow up the reactor at any time. They had to gather information as quickly as possible.

“Hey, fried shrimp, not that way. Listen to that shouting. You’ll get caught in a protest.”

“Fwehhh?”

The glasses girl raised a hysterical cry as a stream of people filled an intersection up ahead. Men and women carrying a motley collection of placards and banners marched through while yelling angrily.

“We don’t want goods! Remove that benevolent barrier!!”

“Valhalla is our city! Soldiers, get out!!”

“Feel the anger of a family torn apart!!”

Mariydi put her hands on her hips and sighed before looking to the clock in the parking lot.

“Ahh, ahh. So the shopping district is full of young men and women at 8 at night.

Sure is peaceful here."

"…I don't think this is anything to laugh about." Nancy pouted her lips for once. "The benevolent barrier and the Divided City name have only been around for about a year, you know? How do you expect people to accept being suddenly separated like that?"

She seemed to be looking at a small girl in the crowd. The side ponytail on the left of her head swayed about as she moved every which way while holding a handwritten placard saying "give back my sister". She had bandages around her thumb and forefinger, so she may have hurt herself using a hammer to make the placard.

"Those scraps of metal even divide up the Sacred Forest, so there are examples of family members and relatives being torn apart. It probably feels like having the world taken away from them."

She's the kind of person who runs out and donates to charity after seeing a movie where a sick kid dies, isn't she? thought an exasperated Mariydi.

"I get what you're saying, but what do you want me to do? Starting a war on my own isn't going to change anything."

"Well…"

"Pleas made without a clear vision behind them are powerless. You can't even negotiate that way. Besides, do you know what the point of protests is?"

"Well…to gather a bunch of people together so their voices can be heard."

"Wrong." Mariydi sighed. "If you just wanted to list out what you thought, a lot more people would see it if you posted a short message on an SNS. And if you're more dedicated, you could use a video site instead. But those voices fall on deaf ears. An individual's opinions are easily lost in the ocean of data produced on a daily basis. And even if they spread, they'll be distorted as they pass from person to person. Changing the world isn't that simple."

"Then what are you trying to say?"

"A protest is a means for the 99% to wield threats of economic damage to bring the 1% to the negotiating table," answered the blonde girl.

That idea may have been preset in anyone from the Capitalist Corporations where the size of your bank account determined your human rights.

“I don’t know if there are 50,000 or 100,000 people participating in this protest, but if all of them are skilled technicians and none of them are working while protesting, then this will deliver a major blow to the city’s economy. And that means the 1% can’t ignore it. Well, that’s really more the mentality behind a strike than a protest, but it’s the quickest shortcut to being heard in this surprisingly large and unbelievably cold world.”

Her lovely lips then formed the word “however”.

“The people in that group making a fuss over there don’t look like they’re all that crucial to the city. It might sound cruel, but it looks more like they’re only doing this because they have nothing better to do.”

“…”

“In that case, their next best option is to clog up the roads and do economic damage by blocking traffic, but they would have to do that on a highway that functions as a major artery for the city. Doing it in the labyrinthine shopping district won’t be very effective. The traffic can just have their GPS show them another way around.” The blonde girl continued while pointing over with her chin. “People commonly think protests are a way for the weak to have their voices heard, but it’s actually not very effective for those who are truly weak. If you’re someone society can afford to just get rid of at any time, they’ll do just that when you cause a problem. And if you don’t make any specific demands and it becomes clear you’ll just keep doing this forever with no chance of compromise…well, let’s just say the gas canisters could start flying even if the TV cameras are rolling.”

With a protest being held in a shopping district overrun with guns, Mariydi could not help but wonder when someone would cause a panic by firing into the crowd half for fun, but none of the protesters seemed to consider that possibility. The city truly was peaceful.

And the girls had something to do. If they let things continue, both the ocean side and the mountain side would be blown to smithereens by the reactor explosion.

“I guess the standard would be a foreign restaurant. A cheap hotel with a bar would be my guess.”

“U-u-umm. Wouldn’t you stand out ordering alcohol at your age?”

“I got into the city carrying a gun and driving a truck. It’s a bit late for my age to start mattering.” Mariydi walked toward a neon sign. “And it’s not the drunks I want to have a chat with.”

“?”

The glasses fried shrimp tilted her head and followed Mariydi who avoided the front door and instead circled around to the back and pushed open the door without permission. That should have led to the kitchen, but in addition to food, there were a whole roast pig with its belly stuffed with rolls of cash packed in plastic bags and a bunch of frightening-looking men who did not seem like cooks despite wearing the appropriate white uniforms.

At the center of attention to this audience, Mariydi raised a hand and spoke with a smile.

“Hi, intelligence division. Do you have a moment to speak with a fellow Capitalist Corporations friend?”

Several silencer-equipped handguns were immediately drawn, so Mariydi twisted the arm of the man closest to her, used him as a shield, and caught all the bullets on his bulletproof vest. She then borrowed a handgun from the hip of her limp shield and aimed it toward the door of an industrial-size oven instead of the spies who had infiltrated the mountain side.

They all knew what meant and froze in place, so Mariydi alone smiled and

continued speaking.

“Is this loaded with .45 Hammerheads? A few shots from this will damage the gas pipe and blow us all to pieces. But if you’d like to be as roasted as one of your prized turkeys, go right ahead. So tell me what I want to know. …We’re both Capitalist Corporations soldiers, right? Having to deliver whatever someone might ask for to anywhere in the world can’t be fun, but I need this to continue my mission.”

The one who finally lowered his hand and ordered his men to lower their guns as well was the middle-aged man taking the cash from the pig’s belly and stuffing it in a money counter.

“A failed Pilot Elite and a slow-looking indoor soldier in glasses. Mariydi Whitewitch, I presume?”

“Word gets around quick, but I’d prefer you left out that first part.”

Nancy’s spine froze as she sensed a scorched atmosphere she had never before experienced. She was of course picking up on the change in the intelligence division men.

(If not for the Boy Racer poster on the wall, I might have shot him here.)

But the leader man continued regardless.

“What do you want to know? We know you’re caught up in some kind of mess, but we don’t have the details.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to. I just want to know what information you have on this Divided City of Valhalla.”

“Such as?”

“Any reasons someone might want to pay 50 billion dollars to blow up its reactor.”

A stir ran through the air.

The ominous atmosphere that spread through the men was like wind through the conifer trees.

The leader exhaled through his nose.

“Then it’s gotta be this.”

“What?”

“This.”

He pulled a stack of 100 100-dollar bills out from the money counter and casually tossed it onto the kitchen counter in front of Mariydi.

“Valhalla is a city built on a foundation of trade and finance. It does nothing productive such as agriculture or industry and instead charges massive fees as money, goods, and information pass through. By creating their own mountain range to intentionally restrict transportation access, they’ve managed to support a city of a million with that.”

“That makes it a lucrative possession for the Capitalist Corporations, right? I don’t see why the four world powers would want to blow it up.”

“I don’t know the actual total amount of damages.” The leader shrugged. “It’s known as the Divided City now because the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance are managing it via the piles of containers and tanks, but it was a single city originally. The locals proudly view themselves as the people of Valhalla and they don’t particularly care which world power they belong to. Is the picture starting to form in your head now?”

“You don’t mean…”

“I said they have piles of containers and tanks, right? Those obstacles are being used to strictly manage the flow of people and goods.”

And with that established…

“But as you can see, no one cares if someone like you walks around the Information Alliance’s mountain side while wearing a Capitalist Corporations uniform. There are ways through. …In fact, the higher ups seem satisfied with their benevolent barrier on the surface, but the underground labyrinth of subterranean paths, subway tunnels, and underground malls was untouched. Same goes for the copper wire and fiber optic cable.”

“You mean money, goods, and information can all be exchanged between the ocean side and mountain side without the government’s permission!?”

“Hm? Hmm? Is that a problemmm???”

The fired shrimp did not understand at all and the middle-aged leader apparently liked to explain things, so he smiled bitterly.

“A big one. It’s basically an underground bank. Make 3 trips from ocean to mountain and mountain to ocean and anyone can launder all of their dirty money. It can be anything from the crumpled-up 100-dollar bills robbed from a convenient store to the billions a major corporation needs to hide to dodge taxes.”

Money laundering was the act of taking money of suspicious origins and replacing it in a way a third party could not trace. That could mean faking a large win at a private gambling parlor or casino with lax management, exchanging all of your traditional money for electronic money, or using a fake name and a bank account in a dictatorship that was not party to international financial crime pacts.

For that reason, a large fence that crossed between world powers was an attractive target.

“First an online bank or something deposits money in a city bank in either the ocean or mountain side. Then the account name is changed while things are shuffled through the underground labyrinth or fiber optic cables. Finally, the money is deposited in another online bank account owned by the client. Lock the bankbook with the fake name in a safe deposit box somewhere afterwards and you have some nice clean money no one can trace. And if no one can trace it, you can escape both criminal investigations and your tax duty.”

That was a life and death problem for the higher ups of the Capitalist Corporations where money was everything. No, money was what kept war running for all 4 world powers, so they all had to be feeling the threat there.

“Whenever the ocean-side Capitalist Corporations or the mountain-side Information Alliance find a labyrinth path passing below the benevolent barrier, they seem to be blowing it up or filling it in with concrete, but there’s nothing they can do when they don’t have a full grasp of what’s down there. Even if they fill in one spot, people can open a side path by tearing down a wall with drills or pickaxes. But I think the biggest problem is that the people of Valhalla don’t see it as an illegal act. As I said, they see both sides of the city as a single whole. They think it’s no one else’s business where they want to send money in their own city.”

“I see. In other words, major corporations and investors are going to be dodging taxes so much it’s going to get hard to keep waging war, so the military leaders sitting back in New York or London are pissed and trying to tear out the lesion. And to do that, they’re willing to spend 10 Objects’ worth of money and turn both halves of a city of a million into a smoking crater.”

“No, it’s bigger than that. The Northern Restricted Zone is mostly allowed to

remain as an experimental battlefield, but there is talk of dismantling it if it's going to get in the way of the rest of the world's wars. What you've uncovered means there are people out there who don't want that. The local higher ups of the world powers are sipping at the sweet nectar of profit, profit, and more profit that this place gives them, so they're not about to let someone take that fertile soil away from them."

"And they're willing to burn some of it to the ground if they have to?"

"Unfortunately, human rights can be bought and sold these days."

Mariydi quietly thought on this while still using the one man as a shield and aiming her gun at the oven.

(If the detonation plan is limited to the local higher ups who can only wield their power here in the Northern Restricted Zone, their roots may not reach all that deep. I might've just had to give up if this was a decision by the home countries of the world powers, but I still have a chance of a comeback like this.)

"If representatives of the world powers were going to meet in secret, where would they do it?"

"You already know the answer, don't you? The military networks are always monitored, so they can't use that. Cellphones are even more out of the question. Meeting face-to-face is best for a secret conversation, but if the paparazzi caught a photo of their date, it would cause a scene in more than just the tabloids. The only damage control for that kind of treason would be for the VIPs' corpses to end up floating in the frigid ocean along with the drift ice."

"…"

"And even if a third party does have the reactor's detonation code, they can't detonate it from just anywhere. Wouldn't they need to hijack the direct fiber optic line connecting the offices of the ocean and mountain leaders to the reactor? Now, where could they actually do that? You know the answer, don't you?"

The middle-aged man pointed to his feet and winked.

"In that loathsome underground labyrinth. What better place is there to keep a secret? They've already proven that the government can't keep track of what's going on there."

Track 09: Life is Dungeon

“Oh, damn. I knew we were headed to the city, so I shouldn’t have eaten those rations. I can’t believe how poorly I planned this.”

“Hmm. But wouldn’t it be a shock to your stomach to eat something this heavy right away? Warming up our stomachs in advance was for the best.”

The city was a mixture of Eastern Europe and southern Scandinavia, and it was apparently well known for its elk steaks and fried anchovies (and wine that went well with it). The nonalcoholic fruit juice and cheap meat sold at a roadside stand was quite good. The seasoning was strong, so it seemed like it would go better with rice than bread. They chose not to eat at the restaurant run by the intelligence division because those men could slip any number of dangerous substances into the food.

“Here, you have some ketchup from the fried fish on your mouth.”

“It’s just a bit of sweet tomato puree. …Nn.”

Mariydi somewhat forcibly converted it into a more grownup term, but Nancy still wiped off her mouth. And once it started, Mariydi was at the older girl’s mercy.

However…

“Ohh? Young lady, do you not put mustard on your steeeaaak???”

“…Why do you sound so triumphant? Spices just add to the smell. For anyone on the battlefield-…”

“Yeah, I guess there’s no helping it then. Perhaps that’s just what it’s like to have such young taste buds. I’m kind of jealous.”

“?”

“I’m saying you have childish tast-..”

Mariydi grabbed the yellow bottle in a flash.

She covered the thick cut of meat with some stuff that looked hard to grind.

“This much is just what you would call the default, right!? I mean, I am a fully-grown lady after all!!”

“Ahh, ahh. But now you won’t be able to taste the meat.”

“Maybe if I was an old hag with dead taste bu-…”

The glasses fried shrimp stole back the mustard bottle.

“Man, I was really craving some stimulation today. Oh ho ho. And as an adult woman, my buds aren’t as solid as yoursss!!”

“What good are buds that shriveled up without ever blooming? Now, this here is what they call a gorgeous blossom. And the night is young here in Valhalla!!”

“A real woman needs to go at least this far!!”

“No, that’s just getting started!!”

“…!?”

“!!”

The man running the stand looked sad to have his prized food toyed with in such a fruitless battle, but the girls’ lips raised the white flag before their minds.

Even so, they were good girls, so they made sure to eat it all.

“Abh, abbhh…”

“Here, have some ice water. You can hold the glass to your lips. …Honestly, what are we even doing?”

The current atmosphere made it easy to let loose like that.

This was a city that had bought up literal mountains of dirt to turn itself into a crucial transportation point. There was a lot of the yelling and shouting always heard in shopping districts, but there was more than that here on this night. They heard yelling in the distance.

“Valhalla is Valhalla! There is no ocean or mountain side!!”

“End your unjust occupation and leave!”

“Give back Necleka! Give back my sister!!”

“Sounds like that protest is still going on,” commented Nancy.

That glasses fried shrimp normally had her hands full with her own life, but she still spoke worriedly about that distant shouting. She was almost certainly the kind of person that would eat all the food on her dining room table while tearfully watching a documentary about impoverished children.

“If they really want to change the world, they should start an SNS company. Well, not that it matters to me as long as they don’t flood onto this road.”

Now that their stomachs were full of a crude luxury, Mariydi got to the real issue at hand.

“Let’s go down into the sewers.”

“Are you trying to get me to puke back up everything I just ate, you demoooooon!?”

“Yeah, but the villains have their base in the labyrinth down there, so we don’t have much of a choice. If we’re going to defeat them and take back our original lives, we need the actual names of the scum who have infiltrated the military.”

“…That sounds nice and all, but when you talk about getting back to your original life…”

“I’m talking about my war life where I can relax and fire a gun.”

“Ehhh, ehhh? I-I really think there’s another path for you in life. Look, look. How about this, Mariydiiii?”

“Hey, wait. Don’t start ‘correcting’ my life for me. Hey!”

The fried shrimp must have been really reluctant to head into the sewers right after eating because she put on a stiff smile, circled behind Mariydi, and started guiding her elsewhere.

They ended up right in front of the window to a perfectly normal clothing store.

One of the mannequins wore a children’s party dress that was the perfect size for Mariydi. The gorgeous wine-red shoulder-exposing dress aligned perfectly with the girl’s own reflection in the glass.

“Look, look. Couldn’t you live this kind of elegant life instead of one of blood and gun smoooke?”

"…Specifically how are you trying to change me?"

"Wellll… You could learn an artistic skill like the piano or violin as pillar of support for your self-esteem, you could use that to establish a network of connections with people in all sorts of industries at a young age, you could establish a position for yourself in a safe country with no connection to war, you could build yourself a house in the kind of fancy upper-class district everyone wants to live in, and you could start a happy family there…"

"That's too scarily specific!!"

She seemed lost in her own fantasy world, but what they had to do remained the same. They headed straight for the sewers below the city.

The military supposedly had it locked down, so there were no blatant entrances to the underground. And those using them must have decided posting guards would only make the entrances stand out more. The suspicious manholes and drain openings were generally just ignored.

If a single mafia or gang had controlled all of the underground routes, busting that organization would provide information on all of the entrances and it all would have been cut off. But here, no one knew who was using them. There was no single objective or ideology. And thus there was no way of grasping the whole picture.

On the other hand, that was exactly why the villains are feeling desperate enough to blow up an entire city of a million.

"I guess we'll go in through here."

"U-uuhh… We have to enter a tunnel from a muddy riverrr?"

Turning on a light in the darkness was dangerous, but they could not just fumble around in the darkness either. Thus, Mariydi bought an LED flashlight at a random hardware store. And she was allowed to go shopping with the carbine hanging from her shoulder, proving once again that this was the Northern Restricted Zone. They were numb to things such as common sense.

The drain they entered was basically a river given a concrete and asphalt lid in order to develop the city. Muddy water flowed down the center, but there were narrow concrete paths on either side for workers. They did not actually need to get in the water, so they obediently walked along the pathway positioned slightly higher.

Instead of keeping the light on the entire time, Mariydi would flash it on and off quickly to burn the image into her retinas before continuing on. By updating the image in her retinas about every 10 seconds, she connected the dots. This was of course to avoid being located even if they were detected by the enemy. If the light was on constantly, the enemy could simply fire toward the source of the beam and they would be mercilessly filled with lead.

Mariydi had put back on her handmade ghillie suit. It was out of place in a city, but it was still better than her lemon yellow special suit.

“Uwehp. It’s more like an invisible wall than a smellll.”

“Can you not produce anything other than shrieks and burps?”

That said, the smell was quite bad. Simply put, the sludge smelled like rotting mud. Even water could have its impurities broken down by microbes, so it would change like this when it was kept in a dark place.

“Hm.”

After a while, the path branched and one of the branches was blocked. The water could flow through just fine, but countless metal bars had been roughly welded in so people could not pass through.

“I see.”

Mariydi then shined her light straight up. There had to be a manhole there, but the metal ladder had been cut away and metal bars were welded in near the cover. There was also something like a club with a swollen tip dangling down.

“What is that?”

“A cheerful maraca. Simply put, it’s a stick grenade. Any powerful vibration will cause the pin to come out and it’ll fall down.”

The fried shrimp just about screamed, so Mariydi quickly covered her mouth. Why could she not understand that Mariydi had been politely warning her not to do exactly that?

“I-i-is that there because the ocean side or mountain side army was sealing up the labyrinth?”

“No, they can bring in tons of materials without worrying who sees, so they could fully seal it off by causing a collapse with an explosion or building a thick concrete wall. My guess would be this was the Valhalla residents’ doing. They’ve remade

the place into a dungeon full of traps to keep the soldiers from patrolling."

But the labyrinth apparently had no specific group in control and any of the local people could freely enter it. That would mean individuals were bringing in and installing the metal bars and stick grenade traps. …And wouldn't that mean quite a few of the residents would get blown up after failing to notice one of the constantly updating traps?

(It appears to all be analog, but we'll have to pray there are no traps that react to light. The worst case would be combining that with a cheap detergent bomb that scatters chlorine gas.)

She adjusted her light flash updates from every 10 seconds to every 5 seconds and worked to notice any details she might have overlooked.

"Do you have any guesses where exactly they would have held their meetings? This place is spread out below a city of a million, isn't it?"

"Well, there are a few conditions." Mariydi took the lead and eliminated the possibility of traps. "If any of the locals can get in here as they please, no one can apply pressure and have the place cleared. The villains can't have anyone seeing their high officials gathered together, so they wouldn't use an open passageway like this. Whatever form it takes, they would use some kind of closed room."

"Well, I suppose so."

After walking a while longer, they found an unnatural hole in the wall. The wall had been forcibly torn down with handheld tools instead of explosives. Stepping through it led to an underground mall with its metal shutters down. The odor from the drainage river flowed in and killed the fashionable image of the brand-name shops there.

"If high officials from the 4 world powers are gathering to talk, it would of course be a mixture of affiliations. They would want somewhere accessible from both the ocean side and mountain side."

"That does make sense. If the only entrance was on the Information Alliance side of the city, it could throw off the balance between the world powers. They'd probably charge a passage toll or meeting fee."

"On top of that, they have to detonate the reactor buried below Valhalla. They would want to hold a position from which they could tap into the direct fiber optic cable to input the detonation code."

“Can you just get to the point and give me the answerrr?”

“It’s simple,” said Mariydi before giving her conclusion. “They’ll be right below the large fence running down the middle of Valhalla. They’ll use the underground storage room for the JPlevelMHD reactor buried by the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance.”

They walked through the complex arrangement of passageways in the underground mall, climbed through another large hole in a wall, and found themselves in something like a formal office. It seemed to be the basement of a government building.

No…

“This is the historic relic in the center of Valhalla…the Sacred Forest.” Mariydi looked around. “But I’m sure a lot of powerful people wanted to build themselves a palace in the center of the city. They wouldn’t see the problem as long as they didn’t damage the trees, so it seems they looked belowground and built a largescale subterranean government office. It’s a giant geofront.”

“…”

“I bet the militaries in charge of the ocean and mountain sides didn’t really care about the Sacred Forest at all. They were really trying to split this apart to crush the old ruling system.”

Then they had placed an Object reactor underground here and remade it into a dangerous self-destruct facility that would instantly take a million lives. The world was just as insane as always. It seemed to have caught a fatal disease at some point.

“B-but that means this is the evil boss’s headquarters, right? Won’t they have a big army waitinnnggg?”

“Why would they want to bring a large force with them for secret talks? You can’t put a lock on people’s mouths.”

In other words, there would only be a small number of tightlipped elites here.

That group would not have believed in the clean war concept in the first place, so their pride would not be harmed even if they saw their bosses exchanging secret handshakes even as they fought over their claimed ideas of justice back aboveground. They were the ultimate realists. They would be the soldiers who would precisely and mechanically carry out their orders without batting an eye

even if they were told to shoot a baby or pregnant woman. …Mariydi did not particularly care about that, but she was not going to praise them or look up to them either.

“We’ve finally reached those despicable bastards. Are you ready?”

“Um? What exactly am I supposed to be ready for???”

With an exasperated sigh, Mariydi just about tossed her a handgun, but she stopped herself at the last second. Even if that fried shrimp was military, she had only worked on filing paperwork in an office. Carelessly handing her a gun could easily get Mariydi shot in the back.

The younger girl struggled for an answer with an incredibly grim look on her face.

“……
……Moral support?”

“I may have been known around my neighborhood as slow, but even I can tell you’re mocking me here.”

The entranceway of the underground government office looked about the same as the reception desk of a major corporation. The only real difference from a normal building was that the more important floors were located further down instead of up. This here did not seem to be an actual work division. It had probably been a space rented out for regional promotion. When the facility had been run properly, it had likely been used for events and trade shows.

The large atrium floor leading down had a stopped escalator on one end. There was also an elevator and emergency stairway by the wall.

And in there…

“Ah.”

A distinct human silhouette was visible in the light flash.

He must have been surprised too. His face was hidden by a mask and his eye line was covered by night vision goggles. The lenses could be heard whirring.

Before he could recover, Mariydi fired 2 rifle bullets into his face.

The corpse rolled backwards with half its head missing, but the loud gunshots had alerted all the others to their location.

Mariydi shoved the fried shrimp behind a nearby column and clicked her tongue.

(Tch. I should've shot him in the heart. Snagging his goggles would've been convenient, but I broke them.)

The ghillie suit and lemon yellow special suit were essentially the same in this darkness, but the ghillie suit noisily shook like a cheerleader's pompoms whenever she moved. It was not suitable for close-quarters combat, so she threw it aside.

She had two options from here on.

Would she turn the light on so she could see and focus on the firefight?

Or would she give up on the firefight, sneak through the darkness, and focus on covert action?

She made up her mind almost immediately.

(I've gotta take the best part for myself.)

"I will only say this once. Curl up behind that shriveled potted plant over there. If you keep your head down until you don't her anymore gunshots, you'll survive this."

"Eh? Wai-…"

Mariydi did not have time to argue. If the older girl did not obey her instructions, then that was that.

She pulled her military knife from her ankle and moved from column to column. Grasping the overall situation was difficult without any light, but the floor was tiled with evenly-spaced faux marble panels. By crouching low and following the lines between panels with her finger, she could maintain her sense of direction even in the dark.

The enemy was a group of skilled soldiers of unknown affiliation who were equipped with high-precision night vision goggles.

She had an overwhelming disadvantage on the information front.

But at the same time, they were not clairvoyant, so they could not see her with their night vision devices if she hid behind a column or wall. And she had a valuable information source allowing her to perceive the enemy's location.

(The finders for their goggles. Are they autofocus? The whirring sounds are hard to miss.)

Night vision goggles that revealed your position to the enemy in the darkness were defective enough to require a recall, but they probably had not been designed with such close ranges in mind.

She pressed against a round column and accurately perceived the location of someone right on the other side. She only had to circle around and stab her knife through the gap in his bulletproof vest to target from his shoulder to his neck. She took his life before he could scream, supported him so he would not fall noisily to the floor, and then slowly lowered him down.

It seemed the night vision goggles presented a number of problems. Continuing like this would be most efficient. She felt along the dead man, found a few pineapple-shaped grenades on his chest, and borrowed them. She pulled the pin from one and placed it between the floor and the face-down corpse's stomach such that the lever was held down. That only left feeling along the floor panel lines to silently leave.

She monitored the situation from 3 columns away.

"(Oh, no. They got another one! I need a tourniquet!!)"

To help them breathe among other reasons, it was human nature to want to turn an injured person on their back if they were lying face down. And as that caring comrade spoke over his short-range radio, he rolled the corpse over, removing the pressure on the lever. Had he noticed the grenade? Whether he had or not, he failed to escape within 3 seconds, and he vanished inside a blast chock full of shrapnel.

Mariydi used the instant in which the great noise and light wiped away the darkness to lean out from her column and fire her carbine. She managed to shoot 3 men while disguised by the blinding effect. That left 4.

(If I can get rid of 2 more, I can probably turn on my light and shoot them both head on.)

She heard the quiet sound of something whistling through the air.

She had left her previous position while following the lines of the floor with her fingers.

(Have they changed to hand signals for making orders? They must be panicking

because those are pretty exaggerated…but I can't sneak a peek at them without any night vision goggles of my own.)

That said, if she held her breath in the darkness, she could generally track their movements thanks to the unavoidable sound of hard military boots on the floor, the metallic scraping of grenades against their vests, and the overly-loud whirring of their goggles. They seemed to have given up on moving separately, so the 4 survivors had gathered into a single group to continue their search while remaining wary of their surroundings.

(All 4 together, huh?)

That meant a change of plans: no more need to hold back.

She pulled the pin from one of the grenades she had borrowed earlier and tossed it toward the honest noises in the darkness. The fuse was set to 3 seconds. In the instant of detonation, she leaned out from the behind the column and aimed her carbine.

There was no one there.

Thinking back on the image that had burned into her retinas along with the bright flash, she guessed the grenade had only blown away the loud goggles which had been placed on the floor there.

"Not bad."

After a moment of honest praise, she sensed movement from multiple directions. As soon as she ducked back behind the column, repeated bright flashes and loud noises filled the darkness.

Eventually, the gunshots stopped too.

Now both sides were in the dark.

Mariydi grabbed her knife again and resumed her slow movement guided by her fingers on the gaps between floor panels.

The obvious whirring noises were gone.

Thus began a life-or-death submarine game in which both sides hid in darkness and searched for the other's position.

The conditions were 50/50, but something unexpected pushed one side over the top.

(Wet wipes, hm? Well, if you're ordered to remain on constant alert without any baths in this reeking abandoned building, I can understand the feeling, but those are a luxury. The alcohol smell catches in the nose.)

That was just how dangerous the elk steaks and fried anchovies Mariydi had eaten beforehand were, but the stench from the drain had saved her this time. Between greasy oil and disinfectant alcohol, it was obvious which one would stand out over the odorous sludge.

(If they had thrown wet wipes around as bait, they might have had more of a fighting chance.)

Then again, they probably had no idea the alcohol smell was so fatal, so they would not have done that even if they could have.

After sneaking behind and slitting the throats of 2 of them, Mariydi removed her self-imposed light restriction. She switched on the LED flashlight and quickly dispatched the remaining 2 with her carbine.

Then she shined the flashlight toward where the fried shrimp was curled up.

"You can come out now."

"Uuuhh… There's a really dangerous smell hanging in this darkness…ugeh!! I-I-I wasn't asking to see it! Please don't shine the light on thaaaaat!!"

The fried shrimp had apparently seen the one torn to pieces by the trap made from a corpse and a grenade. She fell on her butt and screamed. Her glasses even slipped down.

"C'mon, vomiting heroine, let's head further down and keep investigating."

"Huh, huhhh? My reaction here is the normal one, right? Right???"

Nancy tilted her head and followed Mariydi down the stopped escalator and to the bottom of the atrium. Several cables thicker than Mariydi's arms lay across the floor.

"What are those?"

"They have thick coverings, so it should be fine, but they're probably even more dangerous than train power lines. Try not to touch them so you aren't blown

apart by the power cables that support a city of a million."

The older girl shrieked like always and Mariydi simply followed the power cables. Since they extended horizontally instead of vertically, this seemed to be the right floor.

(This underground government office seems to have more than 20 floors, but we didn't have to go down far to reach the big boss. Well, if they put it too deep underground, the blast of the detonation might be contained down here just like in the underground nuclear tests from an older era.)

Their path left the main event hall and continued through some double doors. The doorplate said it was a conference room, but there was no way anyone would actually hold secret conversations somewhere so visible from the standard spaces. Mariydi guessed it had been used for press conferences.

The door had not been fully closed.

The cables had been in the way.

"Wait, wait, wait… You're kidding, right? They don't have it closed in some kind of vault?"

Even calm and collected Mariydi gave a stiff smile at what she found inside. She used the muzzle of her carbine to slowly push one of the doors inwards.

It was a large space that could have fit an entire 50m pool.

And all of the various cables and cords were gathered in the center.

In other words, there was a metal sphere measuring 10 meters in diameter.

That was the extra-large bomb that would burn away a city of a million.

It was just sitting there.

They found it too easily.

This was the heart of the colossal weapon that had ended the nuclear age. It was the source of all the energy. And that also meant that a single Object would go on rampages while carrying enough energy to power an entire city of a million. It made sense that the existing tanks and fighters lacked the firepower, armor, and so much more to take one on even when working together.

And they had discovered that incredible thing with so little difficulty.

Mariydi had no idea what idiot had given the go sign for this, but this made it all too clear how little concern the local authorities had for crisis management. This may have been another tragedy of the myth that Objects were clean.

“I don’t see any kind of console for operating the reactor.”

“Well, they don’t want an on-site worker to blow it up.” Mariydi pointed at the precision equipment positioned around the metal sphere. “They probably use these sensors to keep track of the reactor’s condition and monitor the readings from a remote location. Only the offices of the ocean and mountain leaders will be able to interfere with the reactor itself. When the workers inform them of a change in the parameters, the leaders can fix it by inputting the proper values themselves. It was because this place is generally unmanned that the villains could station those masked troops here.”

“But if they already control this place, couldn’t they have directly destroyed the reactor without the detonation code…?”

“It’s a sensible thought, but it lacks reliability. In the off chance they failed to trigger a detonation, they would have to rebuild their plan to wipe out the money laundering paradise from scratch. How long does it take from proposing a plan to executing it? 3 years? 5? Who knows how far their losses will grow in that time. It’s human nature to want a 100% reliable method, even if it takes a little more doing.”

But to put it another way, this left Mariydi and Nancy with nothing they could do with the reactor. If they simply destroyed it, it might trigger a critical explosion and it might not. Mariydi had considered the possibility that the explosion would be contained if the reactor was deeper underground, but that was no more than a theory. If they forcibly moved it, it might lose stability and enter a critical state, and the ground could break apart and cause the entire surface city to collapse. There were a million lives on the line here, so they could not treat this decision lightly.

Plus, their goal here was not the reactor.

They wanted the names and faces of the bastards from the 4 world powers who had been secretly meeting here.

“But will there just be a register of names around herrre?”

“What kind of person would leave behind their real name when meeting in secret?” Mariydi breathed an exasperated sigh. “At times like this, it’s best to go back to the basics. No matter how hard they try, people will always leave behind

traces of their presence."

"Hmm?"

"Don't just tilt your head to try and get me to continue! Can't you think for yourself sometimes!? …I'm talking about fingerprints, saliva, hairs, and such. We need to collect everything we can, head back up top, and contact that intelligence division team again. Our only option is to use their database to see if we can find any matches."

Track 10: Database

Mariydi and Nancy crawled back through the drain that reeked of mud and returned to Valhalla's shopping district where the protest was still underway.

They did not have time to get trapped in the crowds that rivalled those of a train at rush hour, so they stayed off the road and continued walking along the lower maintenance pathway alongside the drainage river.

"G-give back my sister. Give back Necleka!!"

"Hm?" Mariydi frowned and looked up. "Is that kid still wandering about here? She's in a dangerous position since a single thrown stone could turn that crowd into a rampaging mob at any time."

"That's probably just how pressing an issue it is. That little girl had to gather all of her courage to do this…"

"Hmm, so adults are affected by that kind of thing? I see."

"That sounds ominous coming from you."

Meanwhile, the frightening-looking men had never expected those girls to show back up so soon. They looked completely taken aback when Mariydi once more aimed a handgun and smiled.

"Help me out, big brother☆"

"Oh, c'mon. We were just about to use a random excuse to leave this city."

They had apparently been preparing to skip town in the middle of the night, but Mariydi pushed through with a mentality of "I don't care".

They were of course in the kitchen of that cheap hotel with a bar in the Information Alliance's mountain side of the Divided City of Valhalla. This time, the spies dressed as cooks were pulling large diamonds out of blocks of beef.

"You all seem to be doing good business."

"If we weren't, we wouldn't live a double life surrounded by people from an enemy nation. And we're talking about the Information Alliance that uses big data

and AI algorithm analysis to digitally manage everything down to the people's habits on the fancy computerized toilets. The tension here is far greater than for you soldiers who are always looking out for each other."

Mariydi sighed and happened to look over at the Boy Racer poster on the kitchen wall.

"Come to think of it, does that mean one of you is a fan of theirs?"

"That's part of it, but it's also a necessity if we're going to blend into a Northern Restricted Zone city. You didn't know? The vocalist, Henry Bloodybull, is famous for living in Los Angeles, but he was actually born here in the Northern Restricted Zone and this is where his soul still resides."

"Yeah. It's only a rumor on the level of an urban legend, but, well, Bloodybull is a pretty weird name, right? But his real name is Blaze Mojito, which is a pretty common name in these parts."

"…"

The glasses fried shrimp must not have been able to keep up with the conversation because she fell silent with a troubled look on her face.

"You'd need more than your fingers to count how many ways they were messed up, but the biggest one by far was that white powder. The fact that their popularity didn't drop even then just goes to show that they were real stars."

Mariydi's vicarious bragging was followed up by a surprising comment from the middle-aged man.

"Yeah, if they hadn't been hiding satirical criticism of this age of war in their lyrics, the government probably wouldn't have sent those beautiful women to ensnare them. A honey trap with white powder thrown into the mix? The higher ups can be pretty cruel."

"…Wait, what?"

"Speechless, are we? Don't let the intensity of the songs distract you and give the lyrics card a good look. Swap the order of the rhyming words and you'll find a completely different meaning. Surely you know they used the devastated capital of Asgard for the jacket of their major debut album."

The middle-aged man might only have known that behind-the-scenes information because he carried out a variety of sabotage missions as part of the intelligence division. It was possible some of his superiors had been directly involved in the

honey trap.

As a fan, Mariydi was incredibly curious about this information, but she had to get back to the topic at hand.

It was time to talk about war.

Mariydi walked over to the kitchen counter and lined up the various pieces of evidence she had gathered at the old underground government office and sealed in plastic bags.

“Get it done ASAP.”

“Okay, okay. We won’t make it in time for the explosion otherwise!” The middle-aged man snapped his fingers to gather his men’s attention and order them to get to work. “But it will still take some time. Since you’re here, want some coffee?”

“I’m not going to ingest anything you give me. Far too risky.”

That actually caused the middle-aged man to gulp with a smug look on his face. Being a target of caution and suspicion apparently helped soothe his pride. Although it was unclear if that was his pride as a man, as an adult, or as a soldier.

Meanwhile, the fried shrimp was sitting in a chair while occasionally sniffing at her own hair or arms.

“Uuh… I’m really worried because that awful smell hasn’t gone away yeeet. I think you should offer to let us use a shower or baaath.”

“…”

Ah, the middle-aged man is scowling again!? thought Mariydi in disappointment, but there was no fixing that now. It was looking difficult to get along with him.

The room filled with the awkward silence of an elevator, but the energetic fried shrimp did not care.

“Let’s borrow their bath! Uuhhh!!”

“You can get weirdly worked up about this if you want, but why are you tugging on *my* arm!?”

“I’m pretty sure I’ll chicken out if it’s just me. C’mooon! A frail maiden is saying she wants to look after her appearance!! Refuse and this ferocious beast will bite you! Roar!!”

The displeased-looking middle-aged man went pale, raised both hands, and pointed toward a door in the back with his chin. Rather than afraid of Mariydi, he seemed frightened of Nancy's foolhardiness for treating that blonde girl like a toy. He probably did not want to be caught in the blast.

(I guess she can hold her own too when she has to.)

But it was no time to be sighing and thinking that.

Yes, the fried shrimp was pulling on Mariydi's arm.

"Hey, wait. You can just take a bath on your own, can't you!?"

"Noooo, IIIII caaaan't. We're in the same situation here, so you take one too. You mustn't give up on your femininity at your age."

"We could be heading back out into the mountains at any time. All the artificial scents in shampoos and body soaps will become a deadly-…ah, ahh, ahhhhhhhh!!!???"

Mariydi was a veteran soldier, but she had just one weakness: her body was so tiny that anyone could easily princess carry her. And with her arms and legs both in the air, she was helpless.

Once the 2 girls disappeared into the door for the napping space which had a bathroom attached, a young member of the intelligence division casually walked in carrying a bundle of printouts.

"Huh? Where did the 2 dangerous helpers go???"

"I can't help but wonder which one of them is really in charge."

The space beyond door supposedly included nothing more unusual than a locker room and a simple shower room, but they heard some highly bizarre screams from there.

"Stop it, you moron!! Ah, ahhhh!! Shampoo in my hair! The deadly artificial scents!! Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

"Ohhh? Does the widdle girl need a shampoo haaat?"

"These giant bouncing things are in the way!! And really, what are you going to do about the smell!? Leaving the city like this would be suicide!"

"Mariydi, you've been living your life wrooong. This is what people mean when

they talk about a girl's scent."

"I wasn't asking about thaaa

A great cacophony sounded from beyond the door.

The men waiting in the kitchen (who were from the intelligence division but were too overwhelmed to even consider peeping) felt their shoulders jump as the door was thrown violently open.

Mariydi Whitewitch was wearing cow-print pajamas that covered her head.

“Pant, pant!! You SOBs sure were prepared for everything, weren’t you!?”

“Ahh, c’mon. You need to dry off properlyyy.”

Nancy Jolly-Roger followed her out with only a bath towel to cover her flushed bare skin. But the towel must have been a little too small because it was a mystery whether or not it was really blocking the sensuality of that hot body.

The intelligence division’s middle-aged man once more raised both hands before pointing something out to Mariydi.

The cow-print pajamas must have been too large for her because she wore only the baggy top without the pants. The neckline showed off the bright top of her chest and the hem left a risqué amount of her thighs exposed.

“…Mariydi, I think you got this backwards. When you wear the cow-print one, it only looks like a self-deprecating joke.”

“Do you want me to show you hell with a cup of water and a rag?”

“Ignoring the one-size-fits-all pajamas, I really can’t think of any clothes that would fit you. …Well, other than the Colonel’s.”

“What, do you have a don in the back of your hideout!? Oh, honestly! Get some spinach or lettuce or some other kind of leafy vegetables and boil them in a pot.”

“Hmm? Do you want to eat some vegetable sooouuup???”

“I’m going to rewash this chemical-soaked hair!! This is worse than the stuff they put on you so military dogs can track you!!”

Military facilities of course had shower rooms and the soldiers washed their hair and bodies on a daily basis, but unlike the commercial products, the shampoos and soaps they used only had floral scents.

As her stress was about to explode, Cow Pajamas Mariydi glared over at the men.

“So are those printouts the results of your investigation? What’s the information going to cost me?”

“Th-that’s not an issue,” said the middle-aged man while still pale.

That was an extremely unusual thing to say for the Capitalist Corporations where everything had to do with money, but he apparently had no intention of attempting a negotiation with Killer Weapon Mariydi when she was in such a bad mood.

He tossed the clipped-together papers onto the stainless steel countertop.

“We have plenty of money. As you can see.” He pointed toward the large diamonds pulled out of the blocks of beef. “But there’s more to money than just earning it. The true value is in spending it. So delay the detonation until we can escape. That’s how you can repay us.”

“…You don’t have more of an attachment to this place? It’s your workplace, isn’t it?”

“You’d understand how we feel if you had felt the constant pressure in your stomach as you memorized each individual idiosyncrasy needed to infiltrate an enemy nation. What I’m saying is, this place can go to hell. As much as we’ve learned about it on the surface level, our spirits could never fit in. The thick barrier between it and us thins out little by little, but it never goes away. In fact, the better we get at this and the more we blend in, the more our feelings cool. No matter how well you season elk meat or a fried egg, my favorite will always be a cheese and tomato salad.”

Mariydi would have been suspicious if it had been free, but now that he had named his price, she obediently accepted it.

The information was as follows:

Legitimacy Kingdom

Mike Nightcap

Age: 52. Male. Brigadier General in the army and manager of the army forces deployed to Scandinavia. A grim reaper in the military who can freely choose who to abandon thanks to his control of the land route supply lines.

Information Alliance

Recess Bloodhound

Age: 27. Female. Commander of the Scandinavian aircraft carrier fleet who rose so high at such a young age by using her hacker unit to dig up dirt on her political

rivals.

Capitalist Corporations

Hayato Blackrose

Age: 36. Male. Extremely influential investor and special advisor to the Technical Testing and Ratings Board made up of representatives from multiple large companies. A money monster with Island Nation blood who holds enough assets to personally rival a corporation.

Faith Organization

Uver Derbyfizz

Age: 48. Male. Representative of the Scandinavian Cultural Heritage Preservation Committee. An intentional agitator who has successfully used his influence to apply religious meaning to things.

The middle-aged intelligence officer whistled at the distinguished-looking lineup.

“They’re all big shots with a connection to the military deployed here in the Northern Restricted Zone. Thanks to that we have plenty of personal information on them and have had plenty of opportunity to gather their biometrics. Normally thinking, picking a fight with them wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“But since they’ve picked the fight with me, I’ve got to turn this around. And if I don’t settle this soon, my strength won’t last.”

The middle-aged man tapped on another part of the documents.

“The world powers are always glaring at each other, but they also make a show of announcing that they’re supporting the cooperation of the individual nations and donating toward the peace and development of Scandinavia. They do have a joint council, even if it’s only for show.”

“…A joint council, huh?”

“Even if they don’t really *do* anything, the bureaucrats can send in public money as long as the framework exists in the official paperwork. …They probably get a fair amount of money that way. And it comes from the taxes paid the world over. If they’re spending it all on a secret unit, they should be well equipped.”

Mariydi and Nancy had gone through a lot this far, but some of it had been the actions of a mystery group.

For example,

1. The military zombie outbreak spread using rabies molecular motors.

2. The masked soldiers protecting the reactor below Valhalla.

3. The original exchange of the detonation code disguised by the jamming.

“I’m guessing they generally pit the existing world powers against each other to wear down our power and then send their own forces into the gap that creates. Either way, it doesn’t look like we’re going to have any time to rest. It’s looking more and more like I need to end this quickly.” Mariydi held a hand to her slender chin while rubbing her bright inner thighs together below the hem of the cow pajamas. “Now, I’m getting a better picture of who the villains are, but the real question is what to do as we pursue this joint council. We can’t prepare without having a specific goal in mind.”

“That’s riiight! We can’t just continue fighting endless battles, so let’s get some pictures of their secret unit’s tyranny and use that as a threat to ensure our own safetyyy!!”

“Did you suddenly become so optimistic because you want to end the conversation and get to sleep? Besides, I’m not sure that would work. Are these villains really the kind of people who would leave that kind of uncertainty intact and live in fear of that unexploded ordnance? They would probably just have us assassinated and disguise it as an accident. With as much wealth as they have, they could probably create plenty of suicide assassins by promising to heal their sick little sister or something.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“We’ll turn their thinking right back at them. We’ll tear out the entire lesion.” Cow Pajamas Mariydi spoke coldly. “This would never end if we spent the time to sneak into the depths of each army to take each of their kings. But we already know they’re connected in the name of having a joint council. They already have a system in place for butting heads and holding secret conversations during an emergency. …So let’s do something noticeable enough to bring them all together in the same place. Then we’ll have a chance to slaughter all of the VIPs at once.”

……
……

No one moved for a while.

The world was ruled by a silence so great it was painful.

The one who finally broke it was the middle-aged intelligence officer.

"…Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Assassinating just one of them would be a historic event. Your name would go down in history as a legendary figure on the same level as the sniper who blew the brains out of a president in an older age. And you want to kill all 4? You want to take out an important member of each world power in one fell swoop??? That's more than just a news story. It's a once-in-a-lifetime event!!"

"Yes!! And it'll be a historically boring bit of cleanup. I'll be showing off killing technique that's like threading a needle, but I won't make a single cent. I'll be working for free. So I'll be placing my anger as a laborer in this one. All so I can return to my normal life!"

"My overheated mind has cooled down." The fried shrimp in a towel uttered some nonsense while suddenly straightening her back. "The real problem is that even the villains are human, so I do think you can kill them if you work at it. Sadly enough."

"And?"

"But how long will it take to defeat even one of them? And we're talking about important people scattered across all 4 world powers. Working out their jigsaw puzzle of different schedules and finding a way to finish them all off will take a century's worth of historical work, won't it?" Nancy pointed her slender index finger toward the ground. "I think they'll be able to input that detonation code and wipe Valhalla off the map before you can eliminate all 4 and end this."

She had a point.

It would take decades to even hope to accomplish this, but the villains had already had a timer counting down toward the detonation of their bomb. It was obvious which would happen first.

But Cow Pajamas Mariydi had an immediate answer with a cruel smile on her lips.

"I have an idea about that."

"And what might that be?" asked the middle-aged man who looked more concerned than curious.

“First of all, the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance militaries that truly control the ocean and mountain sides do not want to blow up the reactor. It’s a third party that holds the detonation code.” The girl raised 1 and then 2 fingers. “Next, the detonation code the villains will use is only an electronic signal that is inputted by hand. …To make this incredibly simple, even if they have a secret method of detonating it from outside the city, they can’t detonate it if we cut all the lines connecting to the Divided City of Valhalla. Because then they can’t use the direct hotlines prepared for the ocean and mountain leaders.”

“…You mean we can prevent the explosion by shutting down all communications?”

“That isn’t enough.” Cow Pajamas Mariydi winked. “The people of Valhalla aren’t stupid, so they’ll have things back up and running in 2 or 3 days. This method can’t ensure peace long term. And shutting down communications won’t cause the 4 villains to panic either. They can support the seemingly benevolent recovery work and input the detonation code once a line is back up.”

“Then what do we do?”

“Something much flashier,” whispered the little demon. Her response was sweet and dangerous. “We blow up Valhalla and wipe that city of a million off the map before they can. If they see an entirely unexpected mushroom cloud after doing so much plotting in the dark, even those gown-wearing villains sipping brandy and petting a Siamese cat are sure to freak out.”

It sounded like a joke.

When those words were first released into the world, no one could believe what they were hearing.

But a mere hour later, more electromagnetic signals rushed back and forth across the Northern Restricted Zone than ever before.

And among those were these voices:

“Who was it? Who inserted the key!? There is an etiquette to making information attacks. If you don’t contact me in advance, I can’t make my preparations for manipulating public opinion!”

“Wait, don’t say anymore on the signal. This might be an unofficial line, but we never know who could be recording this!”

“Besides, we had it set up so you need to physically enter 4 passwords and we each set one of them. It shouldn’t have been possible input the detonation code without agreement from all 4 of us.”

“…Doesn’t this mean someone got ahead of us?”

“But who!?”

“We shouldn’t say anymore here. Let’s meet in person.”

“Where?”

“Safety measures are great, but this is spreading beyond our plans with every passing second. We can’t spend time on preparations.”

“And we can’t use our ‘usual spot’ since Valhalla was blown away.”

“That’s right. …Then we’ll just have to use the next point.”

“Where is the next point?”

“*There.*”

Simply put, the Divided City of Valhalla and the million people living in its two sides were erased from the “world” at that time.

Track 11: White Sun

Now, let's return to before the explosion.

Some meaningless screaming and shouting continued for a while.

Nancy the Fried Shrimp and even the middle-aged man who had lived in an enemy nation for years as an intelligence officer seemed to bristle at the thought, but Mariydi did not particularly care.

She ignored their fruitless attempts at conversation and spoke entirely calmly.

"As the fried shrimp said before, guiding all 4 villains into place to defeat them would be a century-long feat if done the proper way. And I'm not about to go along with that. …We need to completely smash their plan to take the initiative away from them and send them into a panic. That's the best way to get them to meet face-to-face for a planning session they don't want intercepted. Attack them there and a single missile can take out all 4 of them. And since it's a secret meeting they can't afford to have leaked, they'll only bring their most trusted subordinates along."

"B-but that's…buuut!? M-mushroom! Y-you said mushroom cloud!"

The glasses fried shrimp was panicking, but Mariydi still paid her no heed.

"They have an incredible impact on whoever sees them, but mushroom clouds aren't exclusive to the hydrogen bombs of an older age. Historically, similarly-shaped clouds have also been seen with largescale FAEs."

"An FAE or Fuel-Air Explosive is an artificial weather phenomenon that produces a largescale air pressure difference accompanied by an explosion, right?"

The middle-aged man seemed to be drawing on a foggy memory and Mariydi nodded.

"In the FAE's case, it's because they consume so much oxygen. But if all you have to do is instantaneously spread a difference in air pressure, it doesn't have to be oxygen you take away."

"?"

"For example, the Capitalist Corporations has something known as a Nitrogen Compound Explosive or NCE. It generally uses a nitro explosive – meaning, a nitrogen compound – but by securing the necessary nitrogen from the air, the bomb can be kept small. In the instant it expands from the package, the explosive is formed in the air to trigger a large explosion. And of course, it does this by stealing all the nitrogen, which makes up 70% of earth's atmosphere."

"I see. So you'd be inducing the rapid air pressure difference by consuming the nitrogen instead of the oxygen. 70% of the atmosphere. The more there is to take, the easier the pressure difference would spread, I suppose."

"B-b-but…but! If we blow up something like that in the middle of the city, wouldn't the Divided City of Valhalla disappear into the light regardless!? That's pointleeeess!!"

"It might seem that way if you're looking at a 2D map." Mariydi gave a devilish smile. "But what if you look at the vertical direction? If we increase the altitude and detonate it unreasonably high in the sky, the point on the map is the same, but the damage will be reduced almost to zero. Of course, the mushroom cloud itself is a giant artificial weather phenomenon, so it might cause some gusts of wind that break some windows or something. Still, it's like the difference between blowing up an Island Nation's *Sanjakudama* firework on the ground or in the sky."

"Then, um, when you were talking about cutting off communications…"

"However it's caused, a mushroom cloud will suck in a whole bunch of dust and blast it into the sky, so it'll interfere with any wireless communications. You can think of it like covering an entire city with chaff. As long as we also cut all of the phone and internet cables leading out of the city, it'll be perfect. Whether wired or wireless, Valhalla will have been 'erased' as far as the data is concerned. The satellites will only show a giant mushroom cloud covering the city and any attempt to contact the city will only get static."

Valhalla had limited its own communication access, so the internet lines leading out were all inside a single thick bundle of fiber optic cables similar to a submarine communications cable. Cutting them all would not be difficult.

"You want to detonate it at high altitude, but what platform are you going to use? Surely you aren't suggesting we build our own ballistic missile."

"We don't need to make it that difficult. A normal helicopter can reach 6000

meters these days. A drone that operates the same way can also fly pretty high as long as the signal can reach. With an NCE, the fireball itself has a diameter of 500 meters and the shockwave's lethal range has a diameter of 1500 meters. Fly it up the height of a mountain and the lethal range won't reach the surface. Of course, the noise and shockwave will still reach the city to a certain extent."

"Ahn? Will an explosion like that really create a mushroom cloud? I know you said it was a special kind of explosion, but still."

"Who ever said we're only using 1? We just have to fly around 10 of them up in drones so the fireballs can fuse in midair. They'll combine just like the Island Nation's *Senko Hanabi* fireworks."

"So it's the MIRV method."

"Exactly."

Now that they had a plan, it was time to get to work.

Drones like a hexacopter could be bought at any toy store lately, but they were not equipped to receive long-range signals from thousands of meters away, so they would have to be dismantled and rebuilt with the intelligence division's equipment. Mariydi wanted a specialized algorithm to send the drones up as a single group like migratory birds. …But unlike the overly diligent Island Nation, Europe closed all the shops that did not serve alcohol by 7 PM. So how were they supposed to get the appropriate number of drones now that night had fallen?

Mariydi Whitewitch knew her answer.

"Big brother☆"

"You're just going to steal everything from us!?"

"Would you prefer this, or a gun pressed to your forehead?"

For intelligence agents in an enemy nation, the scene's atmosphere took top priority. The man's fate was sealed as soon as he was overpowered by the smile in front of his eyes and looked away.

"H-how are you going to make those NCE booombs? Wh-why are you rolling up your sleeves? Don' tell me you're going to make them herrre!"

"Once you know how, it's surprisingly easy. This might just cause another commotion at the shareholder's meeting."

True enough, simply making an NCE was fairly simple. …But because it reacted to the nitrogen in the air, you could easily blow yourself up if you were careless in your work.

Mariydi safely worked on the strategic weapon by sticking her slender arms in the kind of special airtight container used for experiments with bacteriological weapons. Of course, the exact ingredients were a secret.

“I guess you could say I’m pouring in my love for my big brother using my lovey-dovey beam. …Sigh.”

“But you are saying that with a lifeless look in your eyes…!?”

Before long, Mariydi had a line of aluminum containers about the size of a 2-liter plastic bottle. The item had been originally developed as a light and cheap strategic weapon, so a delivery drone could easily carry one. And the high-powered recon models modified by the intelligence division were even more reliable.

“The changing times are a frightening thing.” The middle-aged intelligence officer grimaced at the completed products. “When I think about it, we’re creating history’s worst weapon right now, aren’t we?”

“Technology bears no sins. It’s all in how you use it.”

“And it really looks to me like we’re reaching in the worst possible direction with thissss!”

They were controlled with a touch-screen tablet instead of a controller like those used for RC cars. The main purpose of that was to control all 10 as a single unit instead of each one individually.

“It’s nighttime, so send them up now and we don’t have to worry about anyone seeing. We need to set an altitude limit for the detonation. This will all be for naught if there’s a malfunction and one falls down to detonate on the surface.”

“They have sensors for automatically opening the parachute, so that won’t be a problem.”

“Good.” Mariydi nodded. “Once everything’s ready, all of you from the intelligence division need to evacuate to somewhere outside the mushroom cloud’s effects. Signals from the villains should be flying around the area, so intercept as many of them as you can.”

“Since when can you order us around?”

“I’m making it so you don’t have to skip town. You should be thanking me, not scowling at me.”

The drones themselves would mostly fly on their own, but in the kitchen, their programs would send them right into the ceiling. Thus, Mariydi and Nancy had to physically carry them outside.

The drones would become almost invisible once they were in the night sky, but letting normal citizens see them all lined up on the ground was not the best idea. Public or private, people too strongly associated drones with spying, so it would only bring unnecessary trouble.

“Hey, fried shrimp, let’s head back to the parking lot we left the truck in. We need an open space.”

“Ehhh? But wasn’t there a perfect open lot right behind the restauraaant?”

“Don’t you dare launch a bunch of drones right behind a den of intelligence agents! That’s like sending up an ad balloon telling everyone there are spies here!!”

The middle-aged man was more bothered by that idea than Mariydi.

He drove the 2 girls out and back the way they had come.

“Where should we put theeem?”

“Well, anywhere passersby won’t notice them. We can use the truck as a shield.”

With that, Mariydi entered the parking lot, pulled the drones out of the travel bag they had stuffed them in, and lined them up on the asphalt. With all 10 together, it looked like a small trade show.

“Phew. That’s everything set up then.”

“Yes,” agreed Mariydi. “But before we actually do anything, I want to get an answer to something that’s still unclear.”

“Yesss?”

Without even waiting for Nancy Jolly-Roger to make her drawn-out response, the blonde girl grabbed the fried shrimp’s collar and slammed her back into the side of the truck. The sudden shock caused the glasses girl to choke, so she could not even scream properly as Mariydi whispered a question.

“Who are you?”

“Ah…khah…”

“When we first met, I shot your arm to judge the truth of what you said, right? That was of course because I couldn’t trust what you were saying.” The look in Mariydi’s eyes showed she was not joking. “You had no tolerance to pain and no idea how to treat a wound. If I hadn’t helped, you really would have died. I took that to mean you were innocent, but looking back, you passed out before I could really make a judgement.”

Back in that log cabin, Nancy had said she was investigating dangerous Capitalist Corporations elements making weapons deals across the border. She had discovered that “untraceable” weapons were being sold to terrorist organizations from near that log cabin, but she had been captured while visiting the area to investigate.

But someone who did not know how to fire a gun or even walk through the forest would never be deployed there, especially while still wearing an office uniform. A lot was unknown about her independent actions there and Mariydi had guessed the rest of her team had been wiped out. But when she had seen a corpse, it had really seemed like her “first time”, so Mariydi doubted she had any experience in seeing dead bodies.

“Whatever your objective is, I won’t get in your way as long as it doesn’t violate the Capitalist Corporations ways. That’s why I took you with me this far.” Mariydi spoke in a low voice while still holding the older girl’s collar. “But your behavior clearly changed here. In the Divided City of Valhalla. …And it was in the mountain side, which is Information Alliance territory.”

“Ghh… What do you meeeaaan…?”

“You tended to view the residents here in a sympathetic light. For example, those protesters. And your drawn-out way of speaking tended to vanish when discussing the protests or the safety of the residents. Again, this was when talking about people from Information Alliance territory.”

She breathed in and out.

And she asked a question.

“Where does your soul reside?”

That sounded like a Faith Organization kind of thing to say, but it was not.

Mariydi was viewing things digitally.

“That log cabin was a gathering point for delinquent soldiers from both the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance. And you were always sympathetic of the Information Alliance. If you happen to belong to *that side*, I’ll have to change my policy on you. It was my mistake, but you’ve seen the identities and hideout of intelligence agents infiltrating this city. That would put their lives at risk.”

Another important factor was that Nancy Jolly-Roger had mentioned the sum of 50 billion dollars from the very beginning. It had begun as the hidden fortune gathered by the black market, it had then become the price on Mariydi’s head, and it had finally transformed into the “weapon” thought appropriate for wiping clean the underground bank run in Valhalla.

If Nancy had intentionally guided Mariydi here, she needed to find out why. If it involved an ideology or belief outside the Capitalist Corporations’, she could not relax here.

“…”

A short silence followed.

Nancy kept her mouth shut even after Mariydi loosened her grip on the older girl’s collar. It was an intentional silence brought on by hesitation. She had the look of someone who had something to hide and was unsure if they should reveal it here.

Finally, the mystery person spoke.

“I am…from the Capitalist Corporations.”

“So what? Turncoats are a dime a dozen in the Northern Restricted Zone. Like the ones in that log cabin where we first met.”

“I am from a special unit named Cinderella Wizard. …Although that proves nothing since a search for that name won’t turn up anything.” She gave an exhausted smile very unlike anything before. “Mariydi, why do you think the Northern Restricted Zone is even allowed to exist in the first place?”

“Historically speaking, because of the destruction of Asgard. Economically speaking, because it’s a giant experimental battlefield which was intentionally made into a Galapagos that would spontaneously create new technology that could not be gained through normal Object development.”

"…The world wouldn't allow this miniature garden if that was all it provided."

"What?"

"This Northern Restricted Zone provides another benefit. It provides a clear benefit to the clean wars supported by Objects. And, Mariydi, you are no exception."

At first, the girl could not imagine what she meant.

Perhaps that was because it was incredibly obvious and she had already accepted it on a fundamental level.

"This place has a high rate of naturally producing 'candidates' for Pilot Elites," said Nancy. She said it clearly. "War changes children like a disease. Even if a child is an excellent candidate for a Pilot Elite, they tend to 'close up' psychologically when they are exposed to the fear of bombings and pillaging for long periods of time. …When that nightmarish result was discovered in a research report, units like mine were established."

A science award had been established using the fortune earned by inventing the world's most famous explosive.

But as its popularity grew, it became a target of all sorts of conspiracy theories which in turn spread completely baseless rumors and speculation. When two opposing standards were in competition – such as video formats – the one chosen for this award gained overwhelming popularity. Even stem cells and neutrinos only really become household names after winning this award. And of course, a technology better understood by the public at large had an easier time gaining funding, performing largescale experiments, and producing greater results. And the opposite was just as true. There were rumors that someone was using this to select the technologies that would change the world (and could be used for weapons) and thus adjust history in their desired direction.

It was not actually clear if anyone was doing so intentionally.

But had the rumors been enough to get people around the world to pay attention?

"It sounds like a used clothing shop."

"…Yes. If they won't sell while new, the jeans are intentionally damaged and faded and then have a new price tag attached. But in this case, we're talking about unseen psychological damage to innocent children." Nancy took a slow

breath. “I belong to a special unit that has been ordered to collect children who have been orphaned on this quagmire of a battlefield, test their aptitude, and ship them back to the safe countries if they pass. In other words, we recruit for the world superpowers. And since it only looks like we’re protecting orphaned children from the fear of bombings and pillaging and then sending them to a safe life free from gunfire…no one stops us. It’s seen as the power of the state saving the children suffering from war and allowing them to spread their wings as Pilot Elites where they earn more money than a normal household.”

This sort of problem could run rampant at scenes of wartime or natural disasters. For example, when foreign volunteers adopted orphans, it was not uncommon to find out it was viewed as a kidnapping across national borders.

But Mariydi doubted that kind of mistake would happen when they had guidelines established in advance. Even if the safe country Pilot Elite development experiments came to light, they probably had enough legal protections in place to have it viewed as a medical treatment to heal their psychological damage from war. Even if those sealed white rooms were actually sites of what amounted to torture or abuse, the person who had rightfully accused the government would only be made into a villain by the mass media.

“…See? It’s almost too obviously written to be a Cinderella story of a girl rescued by a prince, isn’t it?”

“Whether any of that’s true or not,” spat out Mariydi, “what does it matter? Whatever unit you belonged to, it doesn’t explain why you were captured in that log cabin with only an office uniform.”

“I have no ability to fight. Without ever visiting the scene, I kept an eye on the situation and maintained coordination between everyone, so I was something like the midpoint between an operator and a hacker.” Nancy breathed shallowly while still pressed against the side of the truck. “So I was able to use that ability to open enough of a hole for the children to escape. …Of course, they really should have noticed something was wrong when it kept happening, but it’s possible the soldiers on the scene were questioning their mission somewhere deep in their hearts.”

“And why were you actually on the scene?”

“Because of that benevolent barrier made from containers and tanks.”

Mariydi had already mostly relaxed her arms.

Of course, she was still in a position to instantly kill Nancy with her gun or knife if

the older girl made any suspicious movements.

“Messing with the data to let the children escape is all well and good, but their lives continue afterwards. If they simply wandered around randomly, they could easily blow themselves up on a landmine or unexploded ordnance without even running across the soldiers. But teaching them how to survive in that harsh environment would be meaningless if it meant they would not hesitate to pick up a gun.”

“…Well, excuse me.”

“The only option left was to get them a place to live in a safe city free of gunfire. And it had to be somewhere where the adults could not interfere. …The Sacred Forest in the center of Valhalla was the perfect place. They were protected and distanced from war thanks to the adults of the city around them, but they could still have a small home there without any direct influence from those adults.”

“Are you saying you built an orphanage there!? That’s a thousand-year-old primeval forest!!”

“It wasn’t difficult to manipulate some data to get them the food and other supplies they needed. Our unit didn’t officially exist, so we received no official supplies. We would receive a fraction of an official unit’s supplies, so I just had to divert a fraction of that for the children. That created a sanctuary unknown to anyone, even the other members of my unit. I taught them using something like remote teaching. And if my own personal opinion is good enough, they looked happy to me.”

“…That’s quite the illegal charity work.”

“Yes, I know. I would undoubtedly be court martialed and I’m honestly amazed I managed to keep it up for 2 or 3 years. But it was finally starting to show results.”

She had used the Sacred Forest in which even academic research was forbidden because it was seen as a pillar of Valhalla’s culture. It was the perfect place to hide.

If not for a certain action.

“About a year ago, the benevolent barrier was put up to divide Valhalla between the ocean side and mountain side. They claimed it was needed to evenly divide the city’s area, but that was a lie. Their true goal was to break apart a treasure of this world which is worth more than 50 billion dollars.”

“A treasure of this world? Are you saying there was something like that at the ‘home’ you created?”

“Yes, of course.” Nancy Jolly-Roger smiled thinly at Mariydi’s question. “The Capitalist Corporations, the Information Alliance, the Legitimacy Kingdom, and the Faith Organization…”

And she said it.

“Children from every world power were smiling together and living under a single roof. That is the world’s ultimate treasure and something that no amount of dirty money could ever buy.”

Her logic was different.

Mariydi was good friends with blood and gun smoke, so the plug and socket were simply incompatible. But that was why the words held such powerful meaning.

“There are people who want to profit by keeping the wars going. And they have dug their roots into the world far wider and deeper than you think. And I’m not just talking about some mysterious mastermind on the other side of the world. Even in the happy homes of the safe countries, people watch the distant wars on their living room TV screens and enjoy the superiority of having secured safety with money. Day by day, people consume more profits of war than they do artificial food coloring. Enough so that this truth would make anyone shiver.”

Nancy used specific language to describe a vague feeling.

Even Mariydi felt a sort of fear from those words.

“The people who seem to represent that point of view will never allow something that proves that war need not continue. Especially when it occurred in the quagmire of the Northern Restricted Zone which is far more tragic than the clean wars. Those children’s meager lives are being viewed as a social experiment. If the world at large learns of it, it could easily grow into a major movement. This goes beyond Valhalla’s underground bank or the money laundering. They need the people of the enemy nations to be cannibals, rapists, monsters, and demons who you can’t even hold a conversation with. They fear that the gears of war could grind to a halt. They wanted to destroy that ‘single roof’ even if it meant splitting apart a city of a million and destroying those children’s lives. They wanted to cover up that truth and pretend it never happened.” Nancy slowly exhaled before continuing. “They can’t ignore the children who scattered and fled. If possible, they must have wanted to capture them all and give them as cruel a fate as possible as a lesson to the world. Just killing them would not be enough. They

would have wanted to create a legend to convince the world that 'this is what happens if people from the 4 world powers try to get along'."

So Nancy had been unable to just sit around.

She had likely sensed that her data management skills were not enough to rescue all of the children scattered across the ocean and mountain side of the city, so she had faked her work records to give herself time to head out onto the quagmire of a battlefield in her office uniform.

"Although I ended up accomplishing nothing and getting caught by some delinquent soldiers. I made up a terrible lie and relied on you because I couldn't afford to give up. I had to know whether or not those scattered children were okay. Although reality proved to be even worse than I'd imagined." Nancy smiled thinly. "No matter how much I had worked on the front line, I had never actually experienced the atmosphere on the scene. I didn't know true suffering, yet I still felt like I had saved those children."

Mariydi had completely let go of Nancy's collar by now.

And she clicked her tongue.

"…So that's why you seemed to sympathize with the people of Valhalla so much."

"I didn't realize I was doing it myself."

"You're the kind of person who doesn't care how many soldiers die, but can never allow a noncombatant to be tragically caught in the middle. And it doesn't matter which world power they belong to. You only draw the line between combatant and noncombatant."

And before arriving in Valhalla, everyone they had seen was some form of soldier. It made sense that her behavior had changed after entering the city.

(And it's all so no more children like me will be created, huh?)

Mariydi twisted the corners of her lips into a thin smile at that ironic pacifism.

But if that was her deal, Mariydi could trust her.

She did not know how to fire a gun or walk through the forest, but she had still persistently stuck with Mariydi even after the younger girl immediately shot her, causing her to pass out. The inconsistencies finally clicked into place.

There had been some aspects that could not be explained by assuming it was all

an act, but those awkward puzzle pieces could be explained with a benevolence that did not exist within Mariydi.

“Every time we came across something bad, I was terrified that those children would be used as a scapegoat. With the smuggling base, the zombies created by synthetic molecular motors, and the reactor explosion…I thought I might find one of their names listed as a stand-in villain.”

But that meant they had yet to see the actual plan that the pro-war group wanted to use to dispose of the children. Was the destruction of Valhalla all they were doing to create a tragedy?

Nancy was relieved that she had not seen any of the children’s names, but she also had to be worried that only meant they were being preserved for something far worse.

“By the way, how many of the scattered children have you located?”

“I took me nearly a year to decide to take this final step, so 99% of them are safe. But there were still 2 I hadn’t located.”

It may have been Nancy Jolly-Roger’s humanity that prevented her from writing that off as an acceptable margin of error and instead deeming it a critical failure and putting herself in danger.

“They are twin sisters named Necleka Mojito and Eleanor Mojito, but it would seem they failed to escape and got split up between the ocean side and mountain side.”

“Mojito?” Mariydi repeated the name in surprise. “You mean like Blaze Mojito!? The vocalist of Boy Racer!?”

The Mojito surname was apparently fairly common in the cities of the Northern Restricted Zone, but the fried shrimp weakly nodded.

“There were also children of the guitarist, bassist, and drummer. Do you know why they took stage names to hide their real names? Because they were all from different world powers and they only managed to meet thanks to the bizarre intermingling found here in the Northern Restricted Zone. But that was inconvenient when it came to rising to the world stage. They hid satirical criticism of war in their lyrics because it was their dream to one day play a world tour without hiding their names.”

“…”

The fried shrimp did not seem familiar with Boy Racer's songs themselves.

So why did she know this behind-the-scenes information that not even Mariydi knew? Because she had directly spoken with people close to the band members who had since disappeared.

"Remember the girl with the side ponytail who was protesting with a placard saying 'give back my sister'? That was Eleanor Mojito and one of the daughters of that vocalist you like so much. I don't know what she thought about rock, but I do remember that she liked to sing. I believe she and her twin sister were always humming improvised songs."

"A treasure worth 50 billion dollars, hm? If they inherited his musical talent, that might be truer than you think."

"I don't like converting people's lives into dollar amounts like that," cut in Nancy. "I was worried about her, but since I faked military records to go save them, I can't go talk to her in front of a crowd. She seemed to be carrying a prepaid cellphone, so I'm tracking its signal. I have it set to send me an alert if she comes within a certain range of a military radio signal."

"…I didn't think you had a computer on you."

"I said you can get a prepaid cellphone here, right? Besides, even a payphone can be used to run an embedded program that queries an account at a local bank. Of course, that's an emergency method that only allows strict preset commands found in the data list."

"Are you sure she should be participating in the protest? Whether you intervene or not, that protest is going to be monitored."

"Of course she shouldn't be. But as I said, contacting her in a major way is too dangerous when the protest is being monitored. But the protest seems to be a continuous thing, so I hope she's managed to blend in well enough."

If government agents stormed into a peaceful protest and took away a child participant without giving a proper reason, it could easily develop into a major riot when word got around. The people who secretly wanted to create a 'tragic legend' did not want the spotlight shined on them. The villains wanted to create a Marie Antoinette, not a Joan of Arc. In that sense, taking refuge within the public eye of a protest was not a bad choice.

"…But even that will fail if the reactor sleeping in the center of the city blows up."

“Yes.”

There was a quiet sound.

Mariydi operated the tablet and the drones on the ground began spinning their small propellers.

“I’m not trying to brag, but as naïve as I might be, I am a pacifist. I don’t think I will ever fit in here in the Northern Restricted Zone.”

Once the rotation speed reached a certain point, the toy-like machines broke free of gravity’s invisible bonds. Once they began floating, it did not take long.

As if watching a certain kind of paper lantern, Nancy the Glasses Fried Shrimp

looked up as the military weapons flew up into the night sky.

And she made a clear statement.

“But I have a reason to want to kill the bastards hiding in the shadows here. So let me help you until we’ve done that.”

There was a dull sound.

Mariydi and Nancy lightly bumped their fists together.

They looked away from the flying drones and opened the doors to the military truck.

The hard rock of Boy Racer burst from the handheld music player. But the meaning contained in those deep notes had entirely changed.

Round 1 of the counterattack had begun.

Track 12: Signal Break

The great explosion overhead was surrounded by a vortex of wind that seemed dragged in from every direction. After the direct wind damage, the television, radio, cellphone, internet, and other wired and wireless communication media were cut.

“Wah, wah, wahhh!!”

“Stop, don’t go outside, boy! Tons of deadly weapons on legs are making a mess of things out there, so stay inside!!”

“But, papa, a masked guy just went flying. Like a horse had kicked him.”

“That was a robber trying to use the confusion to get in our shop!!”

The chaos had brought the Divided City of Valhalla to a state of panic and Mariydi skillfully drove through it all. She was moving at speeds where a vehicle with the usual weak tire grip would have been sliding all over the place. Visibility was poor thanks to all the gray dust, so most of the wiser drivers had stopped on the curb to wait it out. That meant Mariydi and the fried shrimp could smoothly drive around without worrying about accidents or congestion.

The younger girl spoke as she listened to a Boy Racer masterpiece.

“Isn’t it mainly the police cars and rescue vehicles getting into accidents? Come on, people. You’re not getting paid overtime no matter how hard you work here, so just pull over. Well, those vehicles are built tough, so running into a road sign probably won’t injure them too badly.”

“H-how long will this fool the villaaaiiins?”

“We just have to pray an overly curious radio lover doesn’t try to leave the city with their prized collection.”

Mariydi was flooring the accelerator, but she did not actually have a set destination in mind. For the time being, she drove toward the Information Alliance exit surrounded by the artificial mountains.

“Can…hear…ydi! …tons of…gnals…ying around. …an emergen…easily…the encrypt… We’re…begin…decryption!”

Mariydi clicked her tongue as she turned a dial on the military radio that had been installed separately to the stereo.

“Damn, we’re being hit by the electronic interference we put in place. We need to contact the intelligence division group that left the city!”

“Seeing all this chaos here, I can only assume they managed to cut the connections out of the cityyy.”

The wired connections within the city were still up, so the traffic control center was safe. It was fortunate the traffic light controls were working. Mariydi did not want secondary damages.

The Information Alliance soldiers supposedly had a gate set up at the Divided City of Valhalla’s entrance, but they must have left to rescue people because the station was empty. There was no need to even get out of the truck. When Nancy glanced over and snapped her fingers, the metal claws of the spike lock retracted into the road. Even with the powerful electronic interference, a signal could apparently reach from a meter away.

After finally exiting the city, Mariydi asked the fried shrimp in the passenger seat a question.

“Be honest: how much can hackers really do?”

“Once you know how it works, it’s actually extremely restrictive and not very convenient. Just like stage magic, the trick is to make it look like you can do anything.”

Even in the dark mountains, the communications situation did not recover.

Only once the lights of the city had completely vanished did a clear voice break through the static that seemed to stab into their brains. It was the middle-aged intelligence agent.

“Can you hear me, Mariydi? I’ve been calling into this thing all night long and I really don’t want that to continue through to dawn!”

“We somehow managed to leave the city. How goes the main task?”

When she stopped the truck, Nancy looked back and cried out.

“Wowww…”

Mariydi checked in the side mirror and saw something like an impressive pure

white world tree towering above the city. Needless to say, that was the perfectly safe mushroom cloud that they had created. The actual damages were nearly zero, but anyone who saw it from a distance would have their heart crushed by worry. The Valhalla residents may have only been so calm because they were too close to see it all.

“So I finally got through,” said the middle-aged man. “We successfully severed the primarily fiber optic cables out of the city to match the timing of the explosion. The Divided City of Valhalla is entirely isolated. Since then, we have intercepted a total of 5,023,619 wireless transmissions in the vicinity. The world was shocked awake, Mariydi.”

“That’s fine, but you’ve managed to single out some of those transmissions, right? We don’t have time to deal with an amateur paparazzo armed with only a cellphone or a video-maker who wants to be famous.”

“A lot of them were military transmissions, but we found some that used ridiculously powerful encryption and yet didn’t match the standards of any of the 4 world powers. We decrypted it by borrowing a supercomputer used to develop new drugs at a California biochemistry university, so we can give you the original messages. The transmissions themselves were short. They probably only decided to meet up somewhere and left the details for that meeting.”

“Get to the point.”

“Don’t rely on us for everything. Listen to it for yourself.”

Mariydi grimaced when he practically spat those words out at her. At middle age, he simply did not understand modern kids who liked to check a video site to see how something ended before watching it.

Then the voice data played from the radio.

“Who was it? Who inserted the key!? There is an etiquette to making information attacks. If you don’t contact me in advance, I can’t make my preparations for manipulating public opinion!”

“Wait, don’t say anymore on the signal. This might be an unofficial line, but we never know who could be recording this!”

“Besides, we had it set up so you need to physically enter 4 passwords and we each set one of them. It shouldn’t have been possible input the detonation code

without agreement from all 4 of us."

"…Doesn't this mean someone got ahead of us?"

"But who!?"

"We shouldn't say anymore here. Let's meet in person."

"Where?"

"Safety measures are great, but this is spreading beyond our plans with every passing second. We can't spend time on preparations."

"And we can't use our 'usual spot' since Valhalla was blown away."

"That's right. …Then we'll just have to use the next point."

"Where is the next point?"

"*There.*"

Once done listening, Mariydi lightly tapped her own temple with her index finger.

And she asked a question.

"Can we use the voiceprints as evidence?"

"We decrypted it using an illegal method, so there's no way we can submit that at a court martial. And this was using a codebook for data compression. Just like cellphone tech, it was only using mechanical presets arranged to reproduce the sounds and inflection of the original voice. You understand now, don't you? This isn't actually the physical voices, so you can't extract a voiceprint from it. You'll only find some electronic tones that sound as much like the real person as possible. This data could theoretically be produced with a computer music program or synthesizer so it can't prove anything. This can't push back their full chorus of lawyers."

"…Then let's quit getting sidetracked and focus on the real issue: is this conversation enough to determine their meeting spot?"

"If I knew the answer, do you really think I would have presented this like a quiz show? We have better things to be doing."

“Dammit!! All this and it didn’t get us anything!? Once they recover from their confusion, we’ll lose our one and only shot at this!!”

Mariydi gave herself over to the hard rock, pressed the back of her head against the driver’s seat headrest, and took a deep breath.

(Think. Complaining isn’t going to make the answer appear.)

Whatever they were going to do, they had no time. She had to find the villains’ meeting place and fire a missile into their table to blow all 4 of them away. And that meant taking action before the meeting was over.

(This situation had to be highly unexpected for them. They won’t be able to use their usual place below Valhalla, but they also can’t all gather somewhere without guaranteed safety. Just snapping a photo of a meeting between 4 VIPs carrying classified information from each world power could easily get them charged with treason.)

The world seemed to expand infinitely before her eyes, but if she ruled out all of the impossibilities and connected the remaining dots, the path would narrow down considerably.

(They will almost certainly choose somewhere they can all meet right away out of the options they have on hand. …But where exactly is that? Even these villains will only have a limited number of usable locations in the Northern Restricted Zone. I’ve been pursued by the troops at their command far too many times already. That should give me an idea of what kind of resources they have.)

The Information Alliance’s Thor’s Hammer SAM network which used a great number of missile containers along with a limited number of mobile radar devices.

The abandoned highway battle in which their supposed allies from the Capitalist Corporations had pursued them with a heavy machinegun.

The Legitimacy Kingdom’s stranded Lævateinn combat train and the zombies created by infecting the soldiers’ corpses with rabies molecular motors.

The Legitimacy Kingdom’s Punish Squadron and the Capitalist Corporations Ice Squadron that had supposedly arrived to rescue her but had forced her back to the surface.

The grounded Faith Organization’s Naglfar Argo-class battlecruiser used to decrypt the flight recorder.

The Divided City of Valhalla where a reactor slept below the city of a million.

"…"

…None of those seemed to suggest a comfortable place for the villains from the 4 world powers to settle down. But that may have only been because Mariydi still did not have a view of the whole situation. In that case, where was the blank black box that still contained a mystery she had yet to see?

She only had to think about it for a moment.

There was only one answer.

"…The rabies molecular motors."

"Hm?"

"Since you didn't draw out that sound, can I assume you're taking this seriously? Unlike everything else we've come across, we still don't know which faction released those rabies molecular motors. Those shut-in villains have been attacking us with the official troops of the world powers by falsifying documents, but that was the one point where they thought that wasn't enough, panicked, and sent in one of their secret weapons. That's why it felt so odd. That's why it stands out."

"But how does that help us? Are you suggesting we search for someone infected with the rabies molecular motors and check the microscopic components for information on the manufacturer?"

"We don't need to look into it that deeply." Mariydi took a slow breath. "You couldn't normally get permission to produce an inhumane weapon like rabies molecular motors. The smallpox-based one I'm familiar with apparently had to do a lot of fighting with the paperwork and that was when it was officially only a tiny amount for a proof of concept. To set up a mass-production system and distribute it as a chemical weapon would require a secret factory, but that introduces some limitations. It's the same as a semiconductor plant. You would need a cleanroom without even a speck of dust and ultra pure water composed of only pure H20. That kind of environment isn't easy to come by in the Northern Restricted Zone where everywhere is shaken by constant bombing and shelling. And this violates international treaties, so they can't let anyone see what they're doing. That means they can't borrow a factory in one of the cities protected by a fragile myth of peace."

Anyone could freely view the earth's surface with civilian satellites. Secret labs

had been built in the middle of the mountains or desert in the past, but that would only stand out now. Even if battlefields were whited out, no one would be stupid enough to rely on that fact.

That meant they would likely reuse an existing facility. The Northern Restricted Zone was a quagmire of a battlefield where the borders were constantly redrawn like a moving amoeba, so quite a few cities or roads between villages had been abandoned in the process. There were somethings one can reuse without catching much attention on the satellite. Just like how the Thor's Hammer's mobile radar had driven around on the roads while disguised as a school bus or large truck.

"It would have to be a large enough space to carry in a lot of equipment and materials where the satellites can't see and it would have to be sturdy enough to not crack when exposed to bombs and shells. They would want to reuse something built for civilian use instead of something originally developed for military use."

She lined up the requirements, eliminated the impossibilities, and worked out the outlines of the answer like carving a human sculpture out of a rectangular block of stone. There was more to this than simple logic. Mariydi's choices were guided by her ample experience fighting in the Northern Restricted Zone.

And she ultimately found the answer.

"…A tunnel, I suppose."

"Yeah," said the middle-aged man. "I sort of remember hearing about abandoned tunnels being reused as wine cellars. That and for growing white asparagus, I think."

"It would have to be quite long, but the ones that run all the way through a mountain can be longer than ten kilometers. Looking at the overall volume, they would have more space than a school to work with. And if it's a tunnel in a forest away from any major cities, they could easily collect the clean water needed to make ultra pure water. Places like that were considered for emergency runways for fighters to take off and land away from the bombings. A small aircraft meant for taking off from and landing on highways was even developed here in Scandinavia. That means it would be plenty strong as a bomb shelter. Plus, a sealed tunnel will already have giant ventilation ducts and a spare power source to release the exhaust. If they used that to generate their own power, no one would notice the power they used. …I could list more, but no other location would be better for a secret factory."

If vehicles kept driving into a supposedly abandoned tunnel, someone might get suspicious, but nothing said the tunnel had just the 2 entrances. In case of accidents, emergency exits were generally prepared at even intervals, but those would be deep in the forest. With the branches spread out overhead like an umbrella, the satellites could not tell if anyone was going in or out.

“But, Mariydi, there have to be hundreds of those abandoned tunnels. This is the Northern Restricted Zone, known for the beautiful fjords created by the ocean and mountains.”

“I know that. And that’s why they’re hiding their tree in the forest. If they wanted an even sturdier facility, there are plenty of candidates, like an old power plant. But something you can find anywhere is perfect for them. That part is important.”

“…Act smug all you want, but how are you going to find the right one? You can’t exactly start from the north and work south.”

“Well, I doubt it will be as easy as checking for exhaust heat with a satellite.” Mariydi slowly licked her lovely lips. “The majority of the Northern Restricted Zone will be whited out and unviewable on civilian map apps, but we just have to pray that you in the intelligence division have been doing your job. It needs to be away from any cities and near a source of natural water clean enough to make ultra pure water, it needs to have more than 5 kilometers of space for both the factory and the soldiers’ living space, and it needs to be near the base of a solid mountain so it’s deep enough to endure anything short of a bunker buster. Can you search for those conditions?”

“I’ve got 83 search results.”

“Add in that the tunnel interior can’t be directly entered from the 2 main entrances because they’ve caved in or the bridge leading to them has collapsed.”

“Wait, wait. Um…still 19 results.”

“Then I’ll add one more thing. Check the records of the local police or the MPs in Valhalla. Check for tunnels with a lot of suicides, accidents, missing people, and other unnatural incidents after it was abandoned. In other words, check for traces of witnesses being erased when they approached on a hike or drive.”

“That brought it down to exactly 1. Hvergelmir Loop. It’s a circular loop tunnel that cuts through the mountain at a height of 500 meters. Instead of passing through the mountain, it’s a junction allowing you to exit at various points around the mountain. Of course, all of the exits have been sealed off by collapses. …Are you a legendary profiler or something???”

“This was only from a few hundred options, so it’s nothing compared to web searches that check through the 10 or 20 billion sites that outnumber the population of the earth. Now hurry up and hand over the map data.”

With that answer, Mariydi restarted the military truck’s engine.

The fried shrimp in the passenger seat began to panic.

“Are we on our way to go attack that secret factoryyy!?”

“That depends. Where exactly is it located?”

“Pretty far away,” answered the man. “It’s 200km away as the bird flies. And since the roads weave back and forth along the fjords, that’s a tragic distance.”

“You heard him.”

Besides, that was somewhere sturdy enough for the world’s 4 villains to gather without worry. Mariydi doubted 1 expert and 1 amateur could do any damage charging in with a knife and a gun.

“So did you procure what I asked for?”

“Just to be clear, this is a piece of junk from the Northern Restricted Zone, so caveat emptor,” said the man. “It’s too late if you later realize it’s missing a crucial part inside.”

“Hm? Hmmmm???”

The fried shrimp was getting annoying, but Mariydi continued driving the truck regardless.

They arrived in the middle of the highway instead of a set location.

The blond girl retrieved her handheld music player, left the truck, and saw some men lined up across the road, shining flashlights on the ground, and slowly walking along.

“Hi. You’re even cleaning up the trash for me?”

“We chose low-pressure tires meant for field battles, but don’t trust them too much. Generally speaking, stepping on a single screw could mean a failed takeoff and a giant fireball around you.”

“Takeoffff?”

The glasses fried shrimp was full of questions.

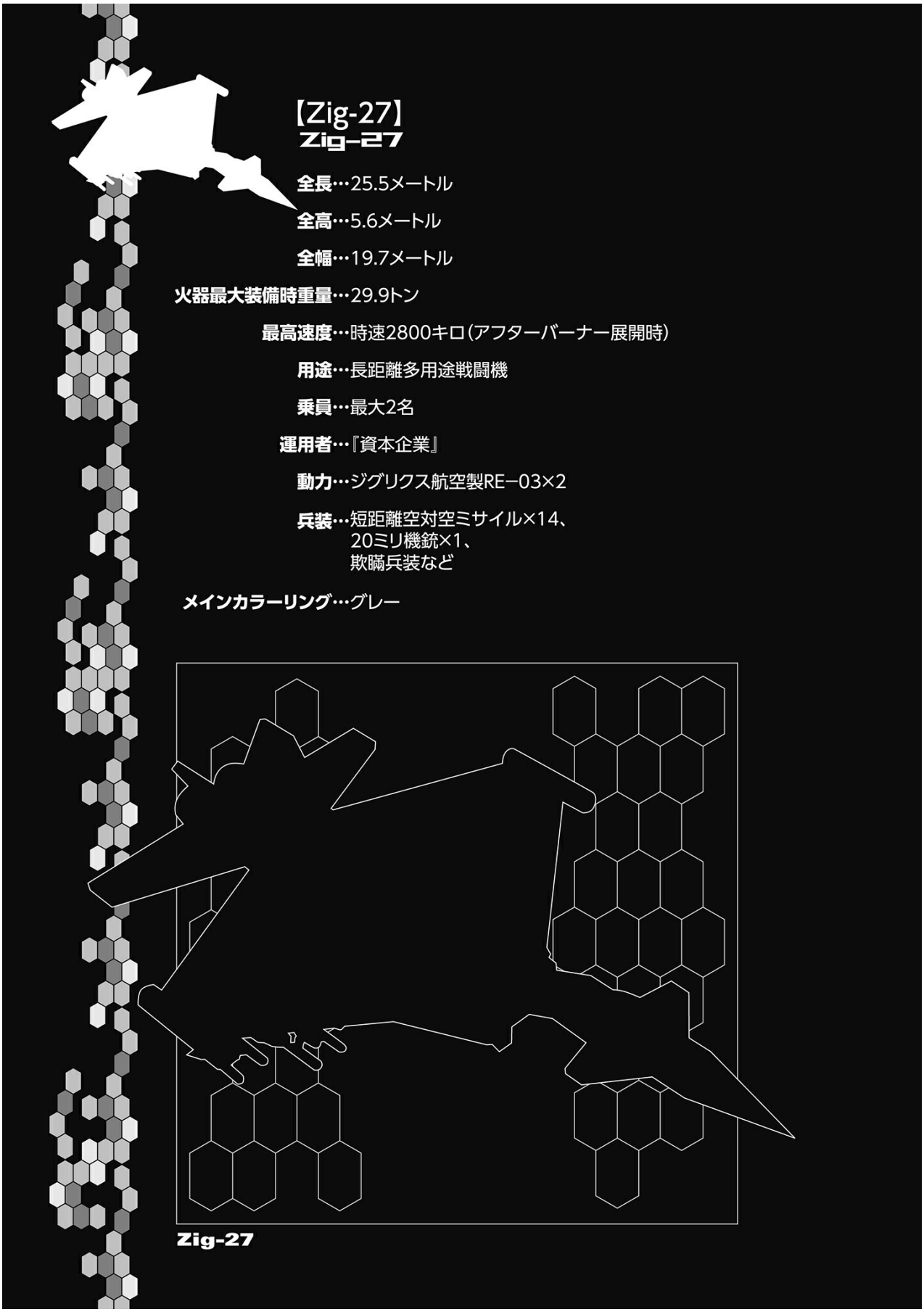
In the darkness, Mariydi took a military flashlight that doubled as a club from the middle-aged intelligence agent and shined the light in a different direction.

Nancy let out a short shriek when she saw what was there:

A large dump truck with a thick sheet over the back.

And a gray-winged fighter that had likely been assembled from the dump truck's contents.

Mariydi had the look of someone who had heard their favorite song playing on a restaurant's sound system.



“The Capitalist Corporations Zig-27, hm? Good job.”

“Wh-wh-wh-why is there a fighter herrrre!?”

“Because we bought one off the black market, of course.”

“Hey, miss, you make it sound simple, but procuring that thing was anything but easy! Especially when you insisted on that large Capitalist Corporations twin-engine model!!”

“And that’s why I honestly praised you for doing a good job. Good boy, good boy.”

Mariydi let out an exasperated sigh and patted the worn-out middle-aged man’s head as she looked over at the fried shrimp.

“Procuring a whole fighter would be difficult, but this is the Northern Restricted Zone. How many do you think are shot down here on a daily basis? By swiping the usable parts from multiple downed fighters, you can create a whole one. The only problem is that they get sold for ridiculous prices because people think they’re brilliant craftsmen just for putting together parts they picked off the ground.”

“…And there are also ones that don’t know what the completed fighter is supposed to look like and end up with an original aircraft made from different fighters’ parts. It’s like they gather all the robot arms and weapons and stick them all on there because they like how it looks.”

“This one was made by a proper ‘craftsman’, right?”

“Yes, but those certificates have been counterfeited lately, so they aren’t all that trustworthy.”

It was all about supply and demand.

In the Northern Restricted Zone, people would gather the parts of crashed fighters like a troublesome old man that gathered old newspapers and magazines bundled up on the porch for recycling.

“…!?”

The fried shrimp did not seem able to speak properly, so she simply flapped her mouth wordlessly and looked to the middle-aged intelligence agent. She was long past expecting to understand Mariydi’s craziness, but her expression said she at least wanted an explanation of how their entire organization could put up with that craziness.

“This is the Capitalist Corporations way.” The man’s response could not have been

simpler. “It turns out our great leader, Mariydi Whitewitch, was even wealthier than we thought. The high-ranking…sorry, high-*earning* soldiers who never have a chance to spend their money are a frightening thing.”

“You’re the one that said there’s more to money than just earning it and the true value is in spending it. ….Do you accept credit cards?”

“You even have an unlimited black card, do you? Frightening indeed. And not many people in any one credit card company are double-strikethrough VIP customers that don’t leave their name in the records! Thank you very much!!”

An incredibly dark handshake was exchanged in front of the glasses girl.

Nancy held a hand to her forehead. Was there some kind of morals-destroying magnetism leaking into the Northern Restricted Zone?

Meanwhile, Mariydi climbed the access ladder and hopped into the fighter through the opened canopy.

“You’ve completed the system check, I assume. What about the physical tests?”

“Our engineer lit the engine and tested the tail flaps, but we didn’t do a real wind tunnel test. The welding might come undone, causing it to fall apart as soon as you take flight, but that’s outside of what we can support.”

“You heard him.” Mariydi gave a truly cruel smile. “What’ll it be, fried shrimp? There hasn’t been a proper test flight and the same goes for a test of the single-use ejection device. In other words, flying in this carries the risk of death. Are you still going to stick with me?”

“As long as there’s at least one thing I can do for those children.”

“No hesitation, huh? To be honest, you probably won’t be anything more than a burden, but hop in already.”

The middle-aged intelligence agent’s eyes followed the glasses fried shrimp’s butt as she nervously climbed the access ladder, but then he frowned a little.

He spoke up while staring at that butt enough to get tired of it.

“Hey, miss, don’t you need a g-suit? We did buy both the top and bottom.”

“Yesssss!? I-if you have one, I’ll put it on! There’s no real reason not to!!”

“It’s used, so it’ll be a one-size-fits-all model that a corpse was wearing in a

crashed fighter, right? She has no tolerance for that kind of thing, so she'll probably puke."

She started groaning just imagining it, so putting one on her would not end well.

Incidentally, reusing the pieces of crashed fighters meant they were closing themselves inside a used coffin, but Mariydi left that unsaid because she did not want the older girl to fill her new fighter with vomit.

Nancy had no choice but to tearfully tie cords around her thighs and Mariydi casually spoke to her while listening to a Boy Racer masterpiece from her handheld music player.

"I won't save you even if you blackout. As long as I'm wide awake, we won't crash. I don't care if your eyes roll back in your head and you foam at the mouth, but try not to bite your tongue."

"Huh, huhhh? Does that mean we're about to begin an unprecedented kind of torturrrre!? Is this divine punishment for trying to act coooool!?"

Mariydi was not about to go along with her complaints, so she closed the canopy. Some might view that as trapping the fried shrimp in the cockpit. The middle-aged man gestured to let her know everyone was away from the back of the aircraft, so Mariydi followed the proper procedure to ignite the engine.

The vehicles lined up along either side of the highway switched their headlights on one after another. In no time, a makeshift runway appeared in the darkness of the night.

The preparations were complete.

"Welcome to the world's greatest centrifuge."

"Are you trying to turn me into butter or soooaaap!?"

The twin-engine fighter rapidly accelerated while held to the ground by gravity, but the aircraft was meant to travel through the sky. It passed 200kph in no time, the air resistance became lift, and the mass of composite armor began to float up from the highway.

These speeds were greater than the average sports car, but it felt like swimming in molasses. It was the same as how watching a video of skydiving for too long made it look like the divers were actually ascending.

"The distance is only about 200km, so we'll arrive in just a few minutes like this.

Prepare yourself."

"Obh, obah, obababababababababah!!"

"What's that weird noise for? Are you the kind of person whose sexual awakening came courtesy of her bike seat? I'll admit the vibration of the engine penetrates your entire body, but try not to enjoy it that way."

While operating her music player to select one of her favorite rock numbers, Mariydi aimed toward their destination with even her head shaking. There was nothing but mountains large and small all around, but human vision was a mysterious thing. When you focused too strongly in a single direction, that direction alone would look more ominous.

Her slender fingers operated the LCD.

Instead of a radar or map, she accessed a "criminal confession" sent to the general internet via a video site. A blonde girl spoke in front of the video camera while wearing an octopus-like gas mask and a raincoat that hid her identity and body type.

It was of course Mariydi Whitewitch herself and it was filmed by the Capitalist Corporations intelligence division men.

In the video, she said the following:

"In the Capitalist Corporations style, we have obliterated the Divided City of Valhalla to destroy the giant underground bank that glorified a false prosperity built on lies that spreads chaos throughout the world economy. A toast to the global director who appropriately manages the world's assets. And we have a warning for the similar underground banks around the world. We will show no mercy, even if you exist within a safe country. We shall purge this planet of all underground banks. This was no more than the tutorial stage for a long-term game!! …Oh, Lord Hayato, Lady Recess. We are filming at the moment, so try to stay out of frame."

She heard the middle-aged man chuckling over the radio.

"I can't believe we actually used their names like that. It's so badly done. Any idiot can tell it's a third-rate fake. Identity theft is a serious crime, you know? The Information Alliance is sure to be pissed when they see this."

"There's actual truth behind our claims, so they can't just call it fake news. It's their turn to be manipulated. These villains are soldiers, so once the organization

gets moving, they can't stop it."

"You mean they'll give the go-sign for an attack on the Hvergelmir Loop?"

"The very mission they electronically signed for will drop a bomb right on their heads. A fitting end for them, don't you think?"

With a derisive snort, Mariydi shifted her focus from the radio to the back seat.

"If there really is a secret factory in that abandoned tunnel, their alarm network will have detected us from the moment we took off. There are going to be anti-air weapons all throughout the forests here. Such as missiles and guns hidden below the tree branches or under plastic sheets."

"Dobh, what, gabh, will you, dobh, do about, gahh, thaaat?"

The fried shrimp seemed to be full of odd noises, but Mariydi's answer was simple.

"Unfortunately, we're not playing a bullet hell game, so we have limited ammo. We can't just blow them all up. And even if this is a large fighter, we need to preserve the armaments hanging from its wings."

Island Nation swords were famous for the sword fights in period dramas, but they actually became useless due to all the blood and fat after cutting down a few people in a single battle. Similarly, fighters were not designed to single-handedly take on a great number of enemies in a long-term battle.

Meaning…

"We'll use our speed to shake all the unnecessary ones. Sorry, but this is about to get pretty acrobatic. I mentioned that your blood will gather in your ankles under high Gs, right? For the same reason, if you don't keep things tight in the crotch, gravity will make you wet yourself whether you want to or not, so be careful."

"Ohhhhhhhhhh, honestlyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!!!"

The hard rock song changed and the fried shrimp screamed as the large twin-engine Zig-27 fighter spun forcefully around.

Spears with long and narrow trails of smoke rose from the surface and attacked their prey in the night sky, but there was nothing to fear since this was not the Thor's Hammer from before. The electronic armaments on the ends of the main wings scattered a jamming signal, the fighter made a sharp turn past the first wave, and it continued further and further in.

“Active Jammer: Defense Delta.”

Heat sources, metal readings, communication signals, and more were used to calculate the location of targets in the mountains and target boxes were displayed there.

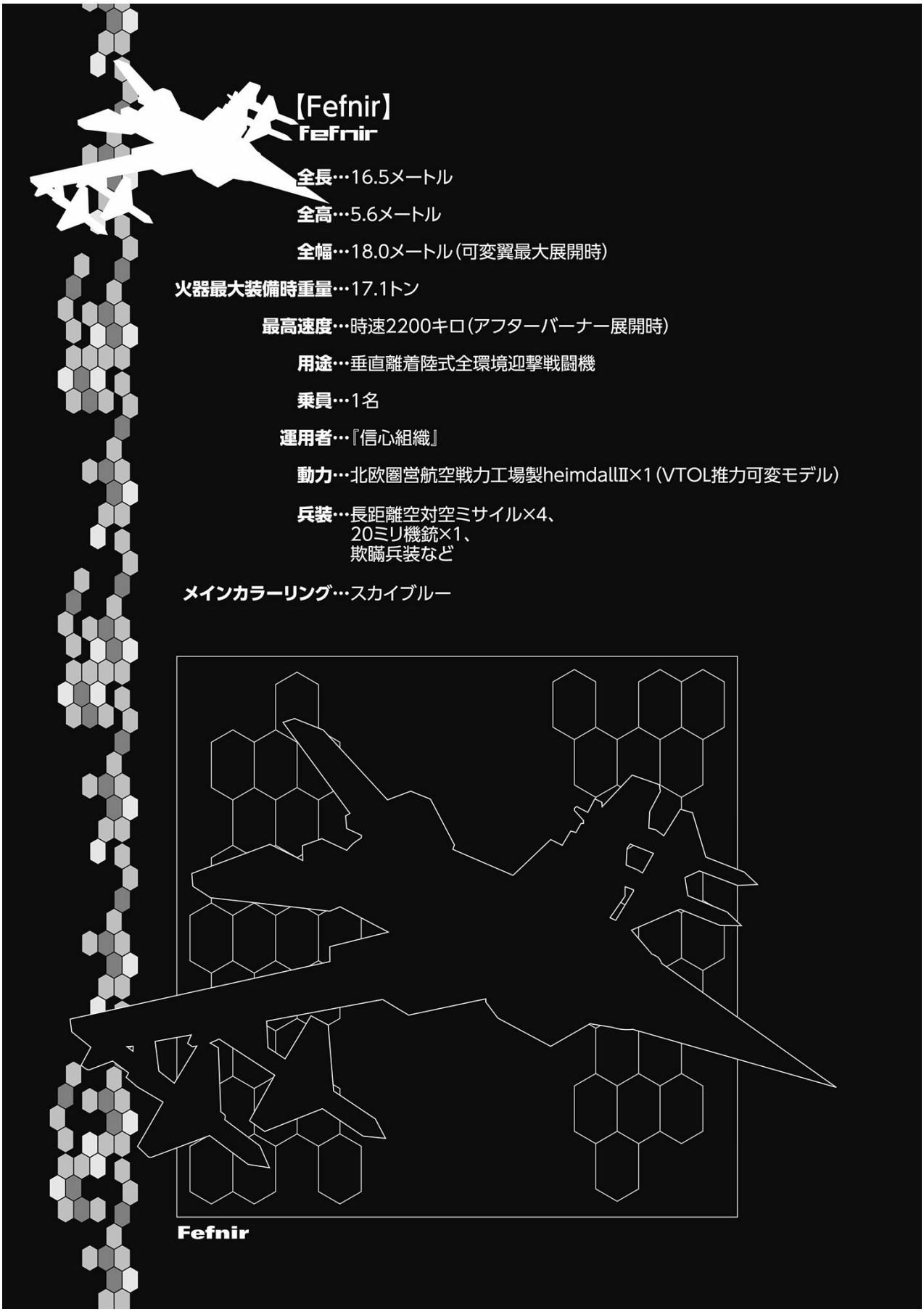
“Tanks and gunships, huh?”

Mariydi kept the Zig-27 at an altitude of 500 meters to focus in the anti-surface battle while making sure not to crash into the mountains. The helicopter gunships could fly, but since they were stopped in the mountains which were only a few hundred meters, she could ignore them without even having to make a sweep with her regular gun.

“These are the guards of a secret factory they can’t let anyone know exists. They must want to avoid flying too high and showing up on civilian CTs.”

Modern helicopter gunships and tanks were equipped with SAMs, but these were apparently using multiple launch systems with warheads no larger than those used for shoulder-fired missiles. The bare-chested machos in movies could hit with perfect accuracy using those, but in actual battle, they tended not to hit unless you took careful aim from behind a fighter flying in a straight line just off the ground to make a sweep with its machinegun. The shoulder-fired missiles carried around by an individual were only an emergency method much like a fire extinguisher. Just as a fire extinguisher could not instantly put out any fire with no exceptions, shoulder-fired missiles were not made to handle every situation. Although having one on hand could still be a relief.

That said, it was not all that easy.



“So they did have more hidden here. Are those Faith Organization Fefnirs? They

really do love their VTOLs, don't they?"

There were plenty of highways and tunnels in addition to the abandoned Hvergelmir Loop. Some small variable-sweep-wing fighters were taking off from those. Instead of using them as runways, they were dragged out onto them like heliports before rising vertically. If she had had the ammo necessary, Mariydi would have loved to destroy them before they took off, but that was not an option. This would all be for naught if she ran out of ammo before arriving at the abandoned tunnel she had to bomb.

"Uhb, if we pass by them, won't we be exposing our tail to them? Isn't that baaad!?"

"It isn't often you bring up such a good point."

Dogfights were about taking up a position behind your opponent, so exposing your tail to them was of course bad. In fact, it was about the worst thing you could do.

But this was not a problem.

After all…

"The cavalry has arrived."

"?"

Just as Mariydi glanced down at the LCD radar display and made that comment, 3 masses of composite armor cut across the night sky as if forming a cross with her course.

The shockwave of their passage just a few meters away shook Mariydi and Nancy's fighter. Nancy blinked in confusion in the rear seat, so had she even been able to see it?

It was not a defense squadron sent in by the villains that had crossed their path.

They were Capitalist Corporations Zig-27 multi-role righters just like the one Mariydi was piloting. If she had seen the emblem largely emblazoned on the main wings, would she have known who they were?

That emblem was a blue maiden's silhouette carrying an ice crystal.

Meaning…

“Ice Sword 2 to unknown. Put out the usual signal on your IFF, leader!!”

“Were you idiots just waiting around for this moment?”

“Ice Horse 3. We’re under your command. What should we do?”

“I’ll crush Hvergelmir with a damn heavy bunker buster, so don’t worry about that. More importantly some Faith Organization Fefnirs are coming. Looks like 8 of them. I’m not really in any position for a dogfight with this extra burden weighing me down. Swat down the perverted stalkers aiming for my ass, will you?”

“Ice Burn 4. Roger that!!”

The trend of the battle quickly changed.

The violence of numbers did exist in the world of aircrafts, but there was a world of difference between the Zig-27s which were already up to speed and the Fefnirs which were only just shifting their vectors from vertical to horizontal. The standard tack was of course to take out as many as possible before they could finish shifting into combat mode.

Meanwhile, Mariydi alone charged deeper in.

“Ice Girl 1 to all. What about the others?”

“Ice Sword 2. Fighters generally can’t just take off without permission. Unlike a certain someone I could mention.”

“So why’d they give you tacit permission? Surely that previous trick wasn’t *that* convincing.”

“Apparently, all of the Pilot Elites around the world who were ‘shipped out’ from Scandinavia could possibly go on strike. This could seriously jam the gears of war around the world, so the higher ups must be sweating bullets. Might make a good diet for them.”

As Mariydi had pointed out when viewing the protest before, the true purpose of protests was for a large group to stop working and apply enough economic pressure for the leaders to sit down at the negotiating table. The Pilot Elites deployed across the world were doing that now.

…The faked video claiming responsibility for the bombing had only talked about the underground banks. It had not mentioned anything about Nancy or the children.

But the Scandinavian Cinderellas created for the villains' business interests must have sensed some kind of message there. They seemed to be supporting someone who had not arrived in time for them and working to not create anyone else like them.

"Curse those high-paid monsters. They've dug in their roots and hidden private troops all around the world."

"Ice Horse 3. Don't say that. This is being treated like a recon mission. If we make enough of a scene to reveal the villains behind all this, the higher ups will get off their asses and do something about it."

"That will take too long. We need to take out the villains before they can escape. I'll teach them who the star is here."

As they chatted, she approached the goal.

The middle-aged intelligence agent must have been monitoring her position because he spoke up.

"You can't miss using a GPS smart bomb. The margin of error is 4cm."

"I'm getting an error on the LCD display, you moron. It can't link with the military satellite. You didn't activate the software right, did you?"

This was only a hunk of junk pieced together from crashed fighters and forcibly loaded with a military OS the intelligence division had scrounged up. Then again, it would be a major problem if a device that was essentially a maliciously emulated version could slip past the authentication for a military datalink, so this failure might have been the correct result.

"Ice Horse 3 to commander. What are you going to do?"

"Are you kidding? The fuse itself is still live, so I just have to drop it freefall-style."

The Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization.

They had to be rushing around out at the moment, but as long as the damn heavy bunker buster broke through the rock and delivered its deadly fruit anywhere within the circular loop tunnel, the explosive flames and shockwave would fill every nook and cranny of the sealed space and reach the villains wherever they might be. They would be blown out like cleaning out a bath pipe.

"…Now, then. It's time to drop this damn heavy load."

She was only flying a collection of abandoned parts. Since it had not been properly activated over the Capitalist Corporations military datalink, she could not use GPS guidance or any other online weapons that received help from an external machine instead of relying only on the fighter itself. That meant she had to rely on an old-fashioned freefall drop that took into account altitude, speed, tilt, the bomb's weight, air resistance, gravity, the Coriolis effect, and plenty of other factors.

Mariydi did not feel particularly nervous.

She was given a guide display, but she did not rely on it too much. It was a little complicated, but it felt about as difficult as parallel parking in the city. That is, it seemed difficult until you were used to it, but you could just follow your instincts once you were used to it.

This skill was seen as old-fashioned in an age full of online weapons where a missile was controlled by a military satellite or AWACS once it was fired, but actual wars were not just a collection of cool scenes like they were in movies. Poor maintenance could cause flames to burst from the engine just after takeoff, a weapon's radar lock could be rendered entirely useless by a poor connection in the wiring, and nothing more than the vibrations caused by air resistance could cause a crack in the base of the main wing. Those crises that would not make a good movie were all too common. And no matter how unreasonable things got, a soldier had to fight and survive to see tomorrow. In the quagmire of the Northern Restricted Zone it was not uncommon to hear stories of pilots using every trick in the book to keep their fighter in the air even with fire bursting from the engine and a crack in the main wing, using the speed of the aircraft and raising their nose to fire a missile like a javelin when it refused to lock, and safely returning after neutralizing the enemy's airfield.

"On your mark. Standby."

When making a freefall drop, it was important not to include any unnecessary vectors. Dropping it while flying in a straight line required fewer calculations than dropping it while flying in a curve. To increase the bomb's flight distance, you needed to raise your nose to drop it along a curved path. To increase its penetrative power, you needed to lower your nose to drop it while pointing toward the ground. But those techniques could be ignored when using a specialized bunker buster. It would be best to fly parallel to the ground in a straight line that did not shift to the left or right.

She was only able to fly so straight on the battlefield because her wingmen were protecting her from behind. While feeling thankful for that, Mariydi prepared to make an accurate bombing.

“Five.”

Five seconds might not seem like much, but a supersonic fighter would travel more than 340 meters in a second.

“Four.”

And dropping this extra-large bunker buster bomb would fill the tunnel with explosive flames and kill every single person inside. Explosions in enclosed spaces were truly tragic. Even if it was 5 or 10 kilometers long, the extra-large flames would fill the entire tunnel in search of an exit.

Not all of the researchers running the secret factory or soldiers guarding the tunnel were necessarily all that malicious. Even if they were assisting a mission that had to be kept a secret, they would have families or lovers and some of them might need the money to save a sick little sister or something. For that matter, the 4 villains themselves would have families and friends.

“Three.”

But she would fire.

Mariydi Whitewitch had become one with her weapon as she coldly and accurately counted down in preparation to drop the deadly fruit.

“Two.”

This may have been the image Nancy Jolly-Roger most feared. This may have been the completed form of what she did not want the children she knew to become.

Only the god in heaven would know what was right and what was wrong. Fully approving of Mariydi was no different from the villains who were abducting war-traumatized children and turning them into Pilot Elites, but fully rejecting Mariydi was the same as pulling back the sword that could save those children.

Contradictions sometimes ran rampant in the world and those distortions tended to concentrate in the military. That was a fact proven by history.

“One.”

Mariydi adjusted her fighter’s vector and speed. All she had to do was release the bomb she held like a clutch and the extra-large aerial bomb would be dropped on the supposedly abandoned Hvergelmir Loop.

“Shoot. Shifting to strike check.”

As soon as the bomb was released from the main wing, the aircraft tilted slightly. She had only pressed a single button, but that had created a discrepancy of more than a ton.

Now that it was released, no one could change the bomb’s course. She only had to watch it fall and accept the result.

Or so it should have been.

But Mariydi clicked her tongue and quickly moved the control column. The aircraft spun around and made a sharp turn as she did everything in her power to leave without waiting for the strike check.

Immediately afterwards, something sharp and black stabbed through the slowly falling bunker buster bomb.

This was not an attack from the kind of puny shoulder-fired missile commonly carried by infantry. However, it was also not a fighter hidden in another tunnel catching up to her.

At nearly 30m, it was the same size as a large fighter. It had a single engine, but the silhouette was clearly different from any existing fighter. There was no division between fuselage and wings and the black-painted aircraft’s swollen base and sharp tip were reminiscent of a double-edged sword.

It was more like a rocket or missile than an airplane.

It had stopped the bunker buster by flying right into it.

This triggered a large explosion nearby and the blast meant to roast the tunnel and blow up the villains instead nearly took out Mariydi’s fighter. She was not shot down, but metal shrapnel tore at the aircraft like sharp claws.

“Dammit!!”

“Gyahh!?”

“Ice Burn 4 to Ice Girl 1!! Leader!?”

“Don’t panic! More importantly, what was that!?”

“Ice Sword 2. Another one is headed your way from diagonally down at 4 o’clock. That’s a blind spot for you, so roll out of the way!!”

“!?”

She clicked her tongue and moved the control column.

Her radar was never fully effective at close range, but this dot kept appearing and disappearing.

(Stealth!?)

Something black passed by at the spot she had just vacated.

It was nearly 30 meters long. It was that large, but it only briefly flashed on the radar when blasting its engine or turning around such that it exposed its belly to her.

It turned more sharply than a fighter, but it was not a single-use weapon like a missile. She had dodged the first charge, but it turned back around in a flash using movements that clearly surpassed the G-limits and then approached once more.

And it did more than just try to crash into her. She was pursued by machinegun-fire and she was exposed to missile lock radar waves, so she could not stop clicking her tongue.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit!! What the hell is this thing!?”

Unsurprisingly, AAMs were faster than fighters, they could turn better, and they persistently stuck to their target’s tail. They would never hit otherwise.

It might seem like the fighter itself should just be given the same solid fuel rocket system as the missiles, but that idea was not realistic.

Missiles could turn so sharply because they were far lighter than fighters and they could fly so fast because they burned through their solid fuel that much quicker.

Single-use missiles were not meant to return, so the design concept was fundamentally different. Building a fighter based on a missile’s structure was bound to cause problems. And even if it worked, the internal Gs would kill the pilot.

And yet…

“Ice Horse 3 to Ice Girl 1. We’ve finished eliminating the Fefnirs. We will begin assisting you, commander!”

“Hurry it up.”

“Dammit, we should have it sandwiched, but I can’t stay on its tail!!”

Bright light and powerful pressure pressed in on her from a distance.

“Kssshhh!! …ce Sword 2 to all. Be careful when intercepting them at close range. These are essentially missiles, not aircraft! Once they can’t fly any further, they seem to ignite all their remaining explosives and fuel to take you out with them!”

“Ice Sword 2!?”

“Don’t worry about me. I took a lot of shrapnel, but I can still fly!!”

“Ice Girl 1 to Ice Sword 2. If the smoke from your main wing hasn’t stopped in 120 seconds, bail out. And they can use the advantages of a missile to the very end? Goddammit!!”

It continually fired on them like it was human, but that seemed to be meant to reduce their freedom of movement, not to shoot them down. So once it had them stopped, it would fly right into them and blow itself up once it was within definite lethal range. These were meant to be “fired” not “flown”.

Their greatest attack was flying into the enemy, but they also had machineguns and AAMs and they had enough intelligence to fire chaff or flares to shake any counterattacks.

“Are they something like disposable brain missiles? How much do each of these bizarre things cost to fire!?”

“Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. They use sharp turns and deception weapons to escape our radar and IR and then register us as a candidate target for flying into. Don’t let your guard down even if you launch a fire-and-forget missile.”

Its overall shape was that of a double-edged sword that narrowed to a sharp point at the tip.

But they would not have appeared out of thin air. If there was a weapon in the air, there had to be a platform that launched it. Even if they were stealth, the platform had to be quite nearby for them to not notice until they were so close.

“Ice Sword 2 to all. Focus on the ocean. Something’s coming from the inlet!”

An especially large dot appeared on the radar.

She could not hear anything while protected by a canopy that could withstand the shockwave of a sonic boom, but it had to have made quite a noise if observed

from the ground.

It was like nearly the entire coast had been disguised.

The camouflage sheet with lots of real tree branches and leaves placed on top was removed and something far too large appeared from between the shark teeth of the sharp fjords.

It looked small from the fighter's altitude, but given the scale, it had to be more than 700 meters.

The overall silhouette was similar to a boomerang, but the design was clearly different from existing submarines and warships.

Mariydi did not really know what it was, but she knew it was bad news.

She trusted her instincts and immediately prepared to drop her sole remaining bunker buster on it.

But it was just a slight bit faster.

A white light burst from the entire smooth rear edge. By the time Mariydi narrowed her eyes at the bright light, the giant form was already gone from that spot. It had completely blasted itself forward. It was a marine weapon that floated in the black ocean, but it lived in the same supersonic world as airborne Mariydi.

The 2 floats directly below it moved backwards and it began to look like a giant ray with 2 tails.

The ray left the jagged fjord, entered the ocean, made a wide turn, and tried to point its nose her way. And it did more than just that. As Mariydi grimaced at missing her chance to attack, it launched long trails of smoke up from the flat island of its upper surface.

They were all those double-edged sword weapons colored black with ferrite.

These were an additional 20 of the same brain missiles as the one causing her so much trouble from behind.

Their courses bent as they began pursuing Mariydi in a flash. They thought for themselves and pursued their target with inhumanly sharp maneuvers in order to envelop their targets in a flower of flames like a missile.

"Goddamn these things!!!!!"

“Ubweh!? Wh-wh-what is that thing!?”

She should not have had time to answer the fried shrimp’s question, but she still politely responded while continually moving the control column back and forth. She may have wanted to calm her own desire for an answer.

“Probably a GEM, or ground effect machine, but it’s huge. From the looks of it, it might be even tougher than the Lævateinn combat train!!”

It was something like a small island moving around the ocean faster than the speed of sound. She understood the principle behind it, but the sight was enough to make her dizzy.

“That…that huge thing…is a kind of airplaaaane!?”

“Like a hovercraft, it can only float just off the water’s surface. Still, it’s a good thing we’re using a fighter. If we had used a warship out at sea or a tank on the coast, we would’ve been killed several times over by that speed and those brain missiles.”

If the nearly 30m brain missiles it used were chemical missiles that relied on an oxidizer despite operating in the atmosphere, then it could be classified as a ground effect machine chemical missile bomber (GEMCMB).

Since it had appeared now, it had to be one of the weapons protecting the villains. It was 700 meters wide. That was more than 10 Objects, which seemed like an unpleasant symbol. Once more, the 50 billion dollar price on Mariydi’s head made an appearance.

“Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. Might the villains be riding that thing?”

“I doubt it,” answered Mariydi while just barely dodging the approaching brain missiles.

“Dbhy, dbhy nhoooot!?”

“The same reason you’re being tossed around back there. The 4 villains won’t have a tolerance for a high-G environment. And the inertial intensity is influenced by the weight of the craft itself in addition to the speed and angle. Move that giant thing around like a fighter and I can’t even imagine what the Gs are like inside it. A normal person would probably end up as something akin to butter.”

That meant it was piloted by someone with the same special training…no, human experimentation as an Object’s Pilot Elite, or it too was unmanned.

The answer came from somewhere unexpected.

It was the middle-aged intelligence agent.

“Mariydi!! We heard something interesting from the old ‘craftsman’ who put your fighter together. There was some big and secret job 2 or 3 years ago and a lot of people in his line of work were recruited, but he hasn’t been able to contact any of them since. He claims it was the same principle as the architect who builds a king’s castle: once the job was done, they were all ‘silenced’ so its secrets would not get out.”

“I’m a little busy trying not to die! Is that sob story going anywhere!?”

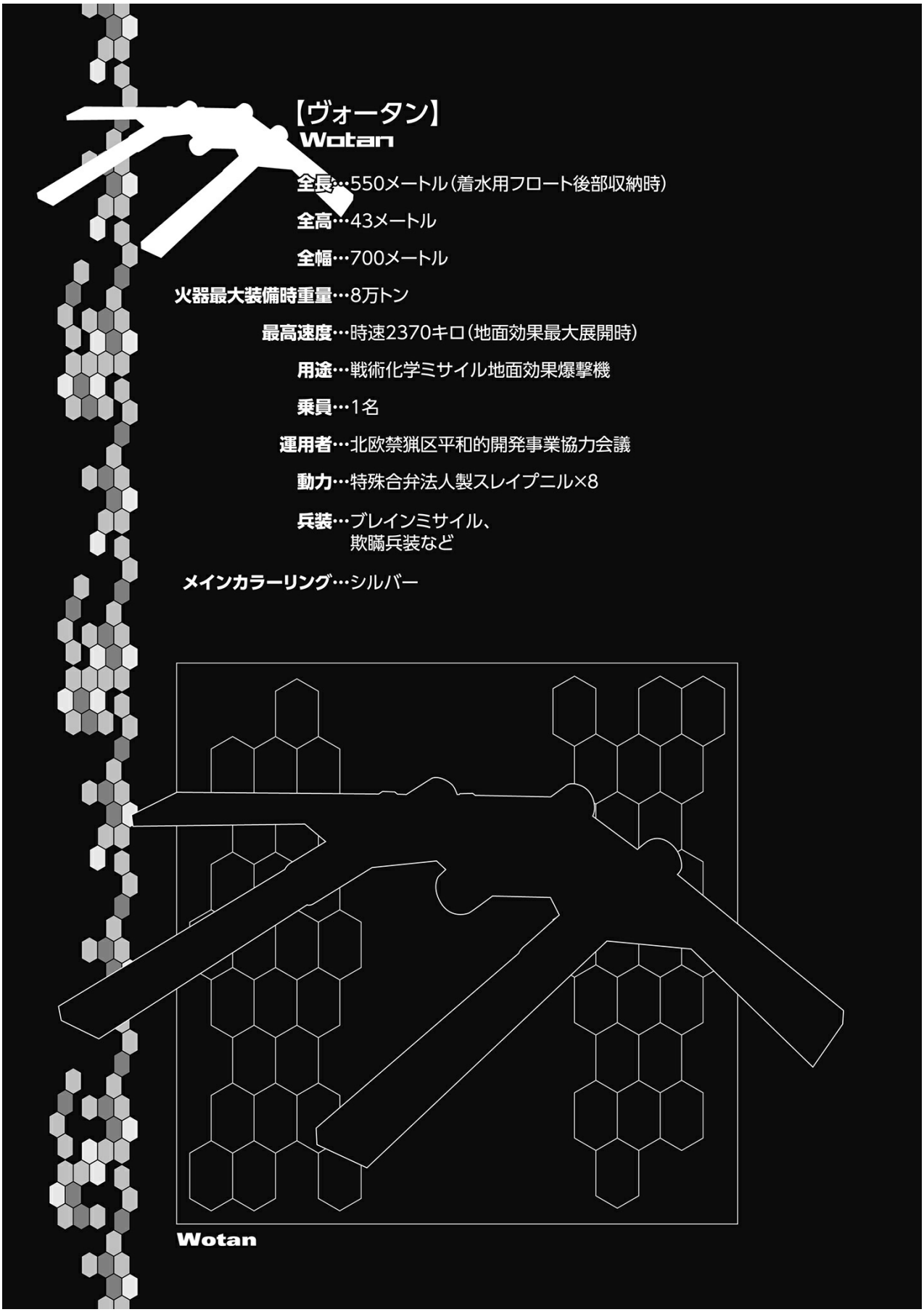
“It turns out the data for the plans was recently sent to the old man. It was probably meant as final message on the verge of death. The plans were for an unbelievably unrealistic weapon, but tracing the money back from the recruiters in black led right to the 4 villains you’re currently fighting with.”

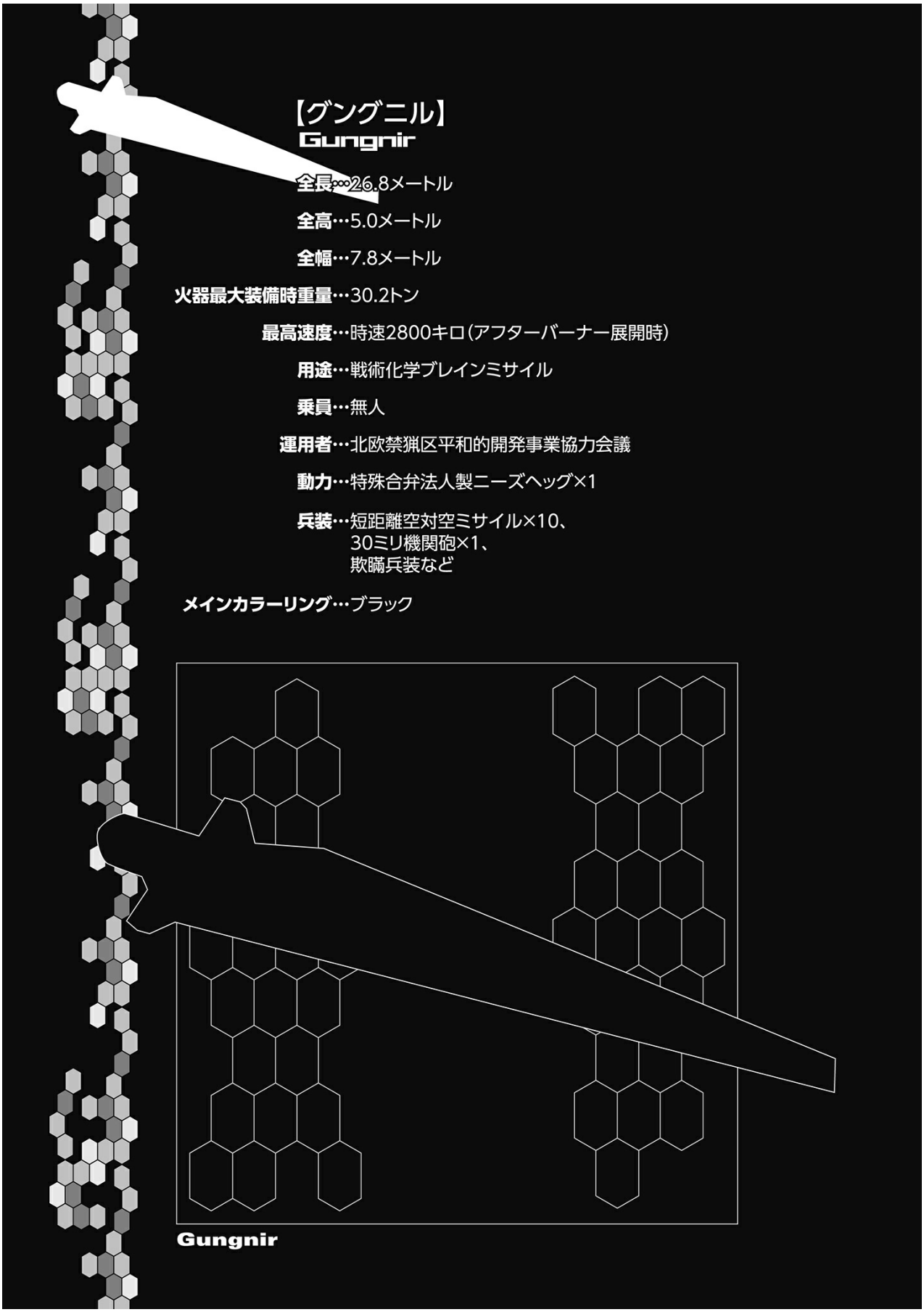
“Was it a 700m-wide GEM?”

“It’s like the end result of trying to make a world record with the world’s largest pot of paella. I’ll send you the data so you can view it on your LCD while we talk.”

“Send it to my wingmen too. If an unknown like me tried to send it to them, it might get rejected by the datalink firewall.”

The middle-aged intelligence agent sounded like he could not believe what he was seeing.


【ヴォータン】
Wotan
全長…550メートル（着水用フロート後部収納時）
全高…43メートル
全幅…700メートル
火器最大装備時重量…8万トン
最高速度…時速2370キロ（地面効果最大展開時）
用途…戦術化学ミサイル地面効果爆撃機
乗員…1名
運用者…北欧禁猟区平和的開発事業協力会議
動力…特殊合弁法人製スレイプニル×8
兵装…ブレインミサイル、
欺瞞兵装など
メインカラーリング…シルバー
Wotan



“Its development codename is Wotan. That’s an alternate name for a certain

head god. It's an experimental weapon that had a laundry list of problems to solve: how to provide the lift to keep something that big afloat, what to do about the pilot given the insane Gs created by its movement, how to control the Gungnir high-speed high-mobility brain missiles, etc."

"Why would they need to rely on something like that when Objects exist!? Those brain missiles might think for themselves and pursue their target with superhuman acrobatics, but they'd be useless against a SAL. I don't see a use for them outside of filling in a gap in the Northern Restricted Zone!!"

"No, no." The man slowly rejected that idea. "The villains are pro-war. And they're the ones that are sipping at the sweet nectar provided by the old-fashioned quagmire of the Northern Restricted Zone that lives on despite the modern clean wars. They would be in trouble if the people who control the wider world decided to get up and crush the savage Northern Restricted Zone. That means they have to avoid making something that does better than absolutely necessary. To soothe the pride of those using the Objects, they have to offer something every once in a while. They need some kind of obvious results from the Northern Restricted Zone."

"…So they intentionally create a weapon that will fail in the wider world?"

"And they spent 50 billion dollars to do so. By keeping the Northern Restricted Zone as the laughing stock of the world, they maintain the power balance and further drive home the impression that this is a Galapagos that can't alter the trends of the world at large. They strengthen the clean war paradigm so that the Northern Restricted Zone is allowed to live on in the gaps. That's why they wanted a bizarre, dumb, and utterly misguided weapon."

Wotan was the head god, but also a god who lost his life in the final war.

That was tragic for the pilot placed inside the thing.

"Ice Sword 2. That's awful."

Like the battery powering a toy doll as it marched toward a cliff's age, that person was doomed to be smashed along with the toy. Had they been deceived and kept ignorant of their fate, or were they prepared to protect the Northern Restricted Zone at all costs? Their body had likely been modified even more than a Pilot Elite's, so there was no aspect of this that worked in their favor.

…And with that in mind, Mariydi felt like she had touched the tail-end of some kind of incredible malice. Nancy Jolly-Roger was groaning behind her in the back seat of the fighter. What had that older girl come to the Northern Restricted Zone

to do? What had her original job been?

“Those Cinderella Wizard people do some pretty tragic stuff,” said the middle-aged intelligence agent. “I’m not one to talk what with everything I’ve done as an intelligence agent, but it was a shock to learn there’s a group like that in the Capitalist Corporations.”

The fried shrimp had nearly passed out, but now her shoulders jumped due to something other than the high Gs.

“They’ve apparently thoroughly modified a kid’s brain and forced her to act as the core of the giant weapons system. She has no will of her own as external electrical signals are sent in as commands, so she’s like a human computer hooked up to a medical life support device. In other words, the fairy god mother prepared a lovely dress and glass slippers for the unhappy girl, but they were not meant to make the girl happy. They were meant to transform her into a product that would please the scumbag of a prince.”

Nancy had contacted almost all of the scattered children.

She had seen Eleanor, one of the twin girls, at Valhalla.

Then who was the final one?

There was only one possible name.

Yes.

Why had Eleanor been unable to find her identical twin no matter how much she wandered around?

“The pilot is named Necleka Mojito. Sex: Female. Age: 11. This is Cinderella Wizard’s greatest offering and the final fortress protecting the piece-of-shit villains. I hate that it feels like they intentionally chose to use the daughter of a vocalist who hid criticisms of war in his songs!!”

Track 13: End Off

Nancy Jolly-Roger had a bullet wound in one arm, she was experiencing the extreme tension of combat which was still a new thing for her, and she was riding in a fighter without a g-suit. She had very nearly passed out, but her mind was shaken back to focus when she heard two particularly phrases through the hard rock:

Cinderella Wizard.

And Necleka Mojito.

She recalled the small girl who had been wandering the dark nighttime streets with a handmade placard saying “give back my sister”. This was that girl’s identical twin.

Nancy had never met them face-to-face, but she clearly recalled them innocently calling her “teacher” over the internet line. She was slow and utterly useless outside of her field of expertise, but she had apparently looked like a perfect superhuman within the rectangular frame on the screen.

She had been in the same Northern Restricted Zone as them, but she had been unable to directly wipe away their tears. She had been unable to physically protect them from the world’s malice. She was not yet ready to be called an adult and she was not at all qualified to be known as a teacher.

All she had been able to do was alter the flow of data and guide things toward a better conclusion.

She had only done what she could from a position of safety while making sure no trouble could find its way back to her. She had simply viewed the distant disaster like someone seeing news of a distant war on TV and tossing some spare change in a collection box next to a convenience store register.

But.

But…

“I know. I really know.”

Nancy Jolly-Roger would never forget the words that had changed her life.

“Our mom and dad didn’t die in the war. My sister believes they did, but that’s a lie. We were abandoned because we weren’t wanted, weren’t we?”

It was true that the Northern Restricted Zone had a higher rate of abandoned children than elsewhere due to the many war damages. With so many war orphans, it was not difficult to slip a small child into the mix without being noticed. Some even arrived after faking trouble while on a trip.

Boy Racer had been a world-famous rock band, so they had to have had more money than they knew what to do with. But because they were pacifists and hid criticism of the current age of war in their lyrics, the higher ups of the Capitalist Corporations had deemed them a threat and gotten them addicted to white powder.

The white powder had destabilized them psychologically and the beautiful women of the honey traps had created unfixable cracks in their marriages. As the pressure had mounted, their own children had begun to seem like a heavy burden and they had ultimately made a horrible decision.

But what did that matter?

The parents may have been wrong to abandon their children, but the abandoned children could not be blamed for that.

“Hey, teacher.”

And yet one of them had asked her a question.

With a look far to weary for a child, the small girl had put on a mechanical smile with no hint of happiness behind it and spoke in a trembling voice.

“Is the child of a failure doomed to be a failure too…?”

Nancy did not think the storybook idea of justice existed in this world.

She was well aware her reasons for joining the military had been more realistic and based in a misguided, money-loving greed that told her to simply obey her superiors.

But.

But, but, but!

Nancy Jolly-Roger had learned then that there were some things she could not allow to happen. What good was that special unit? How was that a merciful plan

that granted the dream of a Cinderella story? Those children's lives were trapped in a labyrinth with no exit, but just when they thought someone had torn a hole in the wall from outside, they were captured by the Capitalist Corporations defense industry, shut in a pure white room, had strange drugs injected through a tube in their arm, and were forced right back to war but as the oppressor instead of the oppressed. They became the Pilot Elites who operated the colossal Objects. And they were imprinted with the mistaken idea that continuing the chain of violence by defeating their opponent was how to find happiness.

Could she allow that?

Not a chance!!

So Nancy Jolly-Roger had remained in the most dangerous post to gather information as she manipulated her allies' information to create holes for their targets to escape. She had been surprised when containers and tanks had been piled up across the Sacred Forest as part of the so-called benevolent barrier, but that had not changed her stance. She had used every technique available to her to track down the scattered children and give them new identities. When she had been unable to find the final twins, she had visited the dangerous battlefield herself.

She had been hoping somewhere in her heart that the reason she could not find those twins was because they had already found a hiding place completely out of the reach of the adults where they had true freedom.

A small thorn had pricked her when she had seen one of the twins, Eleanor, holding that placard in the Divided City of Valhalla.

Give back my sister.

Those twins had always been inseparable, but now one of them was wandering the dark streets in search of the other. She had been unable to stop the anxiety from growing and growing after seeing that irregular scene.

She should have considered the other possibility.

If they had vanished from all records – without even a death certificate being filed – then there were 2 possibilities.

The first was her optimistic hope that the children had hidden themselves so perfectly they utterly fooled the adults.

But the second was that the adults had intentionally erased the children's

records.

And that was the result.

That girl should have been able to greedily seek freedom and happiness without anyone getting in her way, but that had been sealed away by her own hand.

“To hell with thaaa

It was Mariydi whose eyes widened in surprise at the sudden shout.

“Huh? Huhhh!? You, wait, when did you wake up!?”

“That was nothing. I was only getting a quick glimpse of heaven. And I remembered a number of things. So I can’t look down again until I’ve rescued Necleka from that Wotan thing.”

“Wait a minute. I have to ask. Who’s saving who here? Y’know, acting cool here will put my life in dangerous too, so this is kind of the worst. I never said a thing about-…”

Mariydi trailed off when an obvious electronic buzzer began sounding.

She looked over and a red X-mark over the remaining missile count at the top of the LCD.

“You!? Don’t just steal control of the FCS!!”

“…I won’t let anyone shoot that girl. Not even you, Mariydi!!”

Mariydi clicked her tongue without thinking.

Fighter design did not consider the possibility of the two buddies arguing within the same cockpit, so there was nothing to be done if they tried to steal control from each other. And the back seat performed most of the weapons management and hit confirmation. There was no good solution and the brain missiles were still pursuing them. Mariydi did not have a single second of excess brain resources to divert away.

“What exactly do you want me to do!?”

“I’m figuring that out now. Human thoughts can’t be completely covered by algorithms because there will be uncertain emotions involved. But people are a lot easier to read when they’re a piece of shit who’s forgotten all about human emotion. After all, there’s nothing but cold logic remaining. They tend to mistakenly think of that as a virtue, but they’re dead wrong there. …So keep us alive until I can find the answer!!”

“What kind of awakening is this? Did the high Gs tear your wrinkled-old hymen or

something?”

“Do I need to teach you how to be polite while I’m at it!?”

“Ow! Don’t kick the back of my chair!! Okay, okay!! This thing’s pieced together from crashed fighters, so the ejection seat could accidentally trigger at any time. Please stop, stop, stop!!”

“Ice Sword 2 to all. What do you think’s going on?”

“Ice Horse 3. Would you look at that. There’s some good left in this world after all. I didn’t think there were any adults willing to give our great demon queen a spanking.”

“You all prepare yourselves!!” tearfully shouted Mariydi, but unfortunately for her, technology had not reached the point that she could punch them over the radio.

But even if she was able to use her missiles and regular gun, there would still be nothing she could do. She burned through her solid fuel without any thought for what she would need for the BtB trip and she could not properly get on the tail of the Gungnir brain missiles that made constant turns as sharp as an AAM while moving in toward her. No matter how much she blasted her jet engines and performed circus-like acrobatics such as the barrel roll and Pugachev’s Cobra, her opponents calmly followed her, so she had no chance of turning things around. She had no way of intercepting them unless she had a missile that could fly backwards.

But then the glasses demon whispered to her from behind.

“The Wotan mothership and Gungnir child crafts are a single online weapons system. That means they’re connected by an electronic signal. Start by hitting them with an anti-missile ECM.”

“If that was enough for them to lose control, we wouldn’t be having so much trouble! Those missiles think for themselves to pursue their target!!”

“But it will slightly delay their response. After that, fly straight down at a 90 degree angle.”

“…!?”

Mariydi knew what she was trying to say, but that decision took courage even for a veteran pilot.

And Nancy began to squirm behind her.

“Umm, is this the screw to undo the ejection seat’s maintenance panel?”

“Okay, fine!!”

“Ice Burn 4. …Oh, man. A tearful and obedient leader is kind of cute.”

The Zig-27’s nose turned to point straight down, as if to crash the fighter into the ground. No more explanation was necessary. Because they had no lives of their own, the multiple Gungnirs mechanically followed behind her and dived upside-down toward the ocean. It was hard to tell how far away the ocean was in the dark.

(You’ve gotta be kidding me…)

If she pulled up too soon, it would be meaningless. Too late, and they would crash.

“Goddammit!!”

Mariydi wailed like she had been infected by Nancy’s words and she pulled the nose up at the very last second. She shifted from vertical to horizontal. She somehow managed keep them alive by skimming less than a meter off of the dark ocean surface. And the fried shrimp aimed her prepaid cellphone back over her shoulder. The device released a flash of light with the limiters removed.

Under the effects of the ECM, the trailing brain missiles were ever-so-slightly slow to react. In the world of fighters, a few seconds was not a short time at all. They could not trust their radar, the distance to the dark ocean was difficult to grasp, and there was an unexpected flash of light. Despite their superior speed and maneuverability compared to Mariydi’s fighter, they were slow to raise their noses, crashed into the ocean, and blossomed into a giant blazing flower.

“Ice Horse 3 to Ice Girl 1. Strike. You really are the MVP.”

“Flattery isn’t going to work. I’m never forgetting the humiliation I experienced today.”

But the nightmare fried shrimp had apparently been paying no attention to whether they survived or not. She had displayed the Wotan’s plans on her LCD and she zoomed in on various parts for details while muttering something under her breath.

“Extremely thick composite armor…various fire-extinguishing systems, buffering

structures to divert blasts and shockwaves…chaff and flares equipped on the upper surface…chaff and flares? With this kind of defense, why would it still be afraid of attack???"

"Ms. Hyde, what are your next instructions?"

"Ah?"

"Well, you're clearly not the good Dr. Jekyll anymore!"

That said, learning that the Gungnir brain missiles would lose their precision movements under the effects of an ECM was useful information. Mariydi chose to skim across the dark ocean at supersonic speeds as she approached the giant ray-like Wotan that weaved right and left. It would be firing more of its Gungnirs into the sky to pursue them, but that was no longer worth fearing.

"Uehhhh!?" shouted a voice on the radio.

"Ice Girl 1 to Ice Burn 4. Stay back. Let them all target me."

The same method would be unusable once the enemy analyzed the ECM and began controlling the brain missiles with a different frequency. In fact, the brain missiles might even start targeting her using the jamming signal.

But…

"There are signal sources on the ocean too," whispered the beautiful blonde girl. "Course markers, ocean floor seismometers, tide measuring buoys, the chips implanted in dolphins for animal preservation, and more give off powerful signals. And since those signals are no more than waves, their wavelengths will combine when different ones collide. If they're worried about the same frequency as before, they'll soon regret it."

She zigzagged back and forth to draw a line between signal sources and she could tell the combined signals were throwing off the brain missiles' aim.

"Ice Sword 2 to 1. That's not exactly reliable. And if it fails, you'll be shot down!"

"Then let's up the ante a little. I was getting sick of carrying this extra load around anyway."

A giant device was released from Mariydi's main wing as she skimmed across the ocean surface. It was the bunker buster. The large aerial bomb split the ocean, sank into the water, and immediately detonated before reaching the bottom.

The shockwave only had to propagate through the seawater and provide great pressure.

She smiled a little when she heard static running through the radio.

“Artificial earthquakes are a major factor in disturbing geomagnetism and screwing with the signals in a region.”

This time, the brain missiles could not maintain their extreme low-altitude flight and collided with the water one after another. Meanwhile, Mariydi pursued her giant target.

The Wotan GEMCMB had a top speed past the speed of sound, but it could only skim just above the surface. It simply could not turn as sharply as a fighter. Since it could race across the ocean at greater than Mach 2 while carrying more than 100 brain missiles, it was more devastating than a normal warship, but it could not keep up with the aerial martial arts.

“We’re catching up. This is our chance to attack, so have you figured out what to do yet!?”

“…That thing is gigantic, so how does it…? Are these plans incomplete or abbreviated…? The air resistance and balance would be better with a honeycomb structure or domed structure using the air pressure difference…”

“Hey!!”

The giant ray’s back burst open in front of their eyes. Once more, long and narrow trails of smoke rose vertically as Gungnir brain missiles were launched. They soared behind Mariydi and then made sharp U-turns to pursue her.

It was time.

Mariydi clenched her teeth and adjusted her grip on the control column. She had worked hard for this chance, but they would have to redo it. But just as she thought that, the great demonic shrimp incarnation whispered to her from behind.

“Dive below it.”

“Huh?”

“Dive directly below it.”

She had no choice.

Mariydi clicked her tongue especially loudly and steeled her resolve. She opened the afterburners and accelerated.

She sent the fighter into the slight gab between the Wotan GEMCMB and the ocean surface.

“Wow! Ice Girl 1!?”

“Ice Horse 3. Curse that acrobatics-obsessed girl for always making me sweat like this…”

Perhaps due to the narrow space, her radar went dead.

The sword-like Gungnir brain missiles approaching from behind were not that skilled, so they crashed into the ocean and their mothership.

“Ice Burn 4 to Ice Girl 1. That’s a strike on all of the Gungnirs! So don’t worry about them!!”

But she could not celebrate quite yet.

Even the mercenary girl felt a chill in her gut.

This really was only a narrow gap. When including the Zig-27’s tail wing in the height, there was barely enough space. In all seriousness, she only had a few meters of leeway top to bottom. The waves below were being kept flat by the great force used to keep the 700m-wide colossus afloat, but that meant the slight space was a mess of intense air currents. Even with the support of the many sensors, a slight vertical shaking of the aircraft would mean instant death with no chance to bail out.

(Dammit!!)

There was no chance to attack down here. Even if she fired her regular gun or missiles forward, she would be unable to avoid the rain of shrapnel they would cause. Besides, if she did take out the Wotan right now, it would crash down on top of them.

She had to focus on surviving.

Showing your tail in a dogfight was the height of folly, but decelerating now could easily shake them badly enough to crash into the ocean below or Wotan above. She hated having to, but Mariydi accelerated further to pass between the Wotan GEMCMB and the ocean as quickly as possible. It felt like flying below a bridge.

After bursting out from below the ray's nose, she flew straight up to ensure her safety. By decelerating while ascending, she slipped below the Wotan's legs and took up position behind it again.

"Ice Horse 3 to Ice Girl 1. What color were its panties?"

"Shut up, you."

She then noticed something odd.

"What's this? Ice…?"

"Ice Sword 2. What is it, leader?"

There was something like white frost on the clear canopy. She turned her head and saw something similar on the top surface of the main wings.

"Icing? Damn. Did I catch too much ocean spray?"

A thin layer of ice would freeze onto an aircraft's surface when flying in the cold, high-altitude air or due to the air pressure difference its own wings caused. It might seem no different from the frost on a window, but if it occurred over an intake opening or around the engine, it could cause the plane to stall or crash.

And unfortunately, fighters had nothing like wipers, so they could not get rid of something plastered to the outside.

But Nancy spoke up from the back seat like this was a happy result.

"I was right."

"Right about what?"

"About how they support a 700m-wide mass of composite armor while it moves at Mach 2 or 3. That would normally not be possible. Even if they used the welding and bolts that support Objects and even if they used multiple columns, a honeycomb structure, or a dome structure supported by air, they couldn't stop it from destroying itself."

"This is getting long. All, assist me."

"Ice Burn 4. Roger that."

"So how does it manage to exist?"

Mariydi sounded skeptical, like she was seeing a giant ghost in the shimmering heat.

This unexplainable impossibility was calmly floating in the air before her very eyes, but it was so absurd it made her question her simple worldview of only believing what she saw for herself.

And Nancy Jolly-Roger gave her answer.

“The Wotan does not use any screws or bolts. The same goes for columns. I doubt it has any welding either.”

“Huh!?”

“I thought the plans had to be abbreviated when I first saw them, but I was wrong. That trip below confirmed it for me. The Wotan doesn’t need any of that.”

“You aren’t going to say it was made by Island Nation shrine carpenters, are you? If it doesn’t use any screws, bolts, or welds, how is that giant thing held together?”

“Supersonic molecular beams.”

“I wasn’t asking about an amusing weapon.”

“No, this is accurate.” The fried shrimp continued from there. “By releasing helium or another inert gas into a vacuum through an extremely narrow pipe, the molecules are aligned in the same direction and continue to accelerate until they break the sound barrier. That is known as a supersonic molecular beam. If you rob the molecules of heat in that state, they become ultra-low temperature isolated molecules.”

“You aren’t going to say they harden as ice, are you?”

“Before getting to that, the ultra-low temperature isolated molecules are closely related to the van der Waals force, the force that holds molecules together. That’s why it doesn’t need any screws or bolts. By taking the narrow tubes needed to produce supersonic molecular beams and wiring them through the structure like blood vessels, it can directly strengthen the bonds between its molecules to construct that giant silhouette.”

“Between the molecules…?”

“Yes. The ice on the fighter after diving below it was not icing due to an air pressure difference. It was likely the vaporized coolant escaping.”

“Wait a second. My mind can’t keep up. What does that mean? If you strengthen the bonds between the molecules forming a metal panel, will it still behave like a normal metal panel? Or will it become a panel far harder than anything seen before!?”

“Probably the latter. Even with composite armor, it wouldn’t have remained so unharmed after being hit by its own Gungnirs. That’s unthinkable in the supersonic world of normal aircrafts. The Wotan might be able to keep going even if a meteor crashed into it head-on.”

More and more trails of smoke fired from the ray’s upper armor.

More than 20 of the Gungnir brain missiles were launched and they pursued Mariydi’s fighter from behind.

“Ice Sword 2 to all. Let’s take care of these. Leader’s freedom of movement takes top priority!”

“Ice Horse 3. Understood.”

“Ice Burn 4. Roger that!”

While thanking her comrades, the beautiful blonde girl asked a question with a look of disbelief.

“How are we supposed to defeat something like that!?”

Mariydi widened her eyes and adjusted her grip on the control column, but Nancy had a response prepared.

“We don’t need any assistance. Fly straight up and then fire an AAM near its nose.”

“!?”

Missiles generally used a heat source or a radar lock responding to reflected waves, so it was difficult to target a specific part of something. However, Mariydi operated the LCD with her finger and made an image recognition lock on a specific part.

But before actually firing the missile, the enemy made a new action when her radar waves hit it.

A great quantity of metal film flew toward her like flower petals caught in a horizontal gust of wind.

“Wah!? What!? Is that all chaff!?”

“That’s awful!!” said one of her wingmen. “That’s gotta be bad for the environment!!”

Mariydi cried out at the great density just as the Gungnir guided weapons fell into the sea after being hit by their own mothership’s interference weapon.

“Ice Horse 3. That’s a strike on all of the Gungnirs.”

“Even the solid Wotan must not want an explosion getting soot and remnants of solid fuel on the nose’s radar and cameras it uses to see and hear. If that happened, it couldn’t continue skimming across the ocean and would probably crash.”

“So if we make a head-on attack and throw enough firepower at its nose, it’ll crash and- gh!?”

Mariydi’s eyes widened as a kick hit the back of her seat.

Nancy spoke in a low voice.

“If it crashes into the ocean without thinking about the angle of entry, the girl inside will be crushed, you combat-obsessed girl.”

“Okay, okay! Just give me the answer already! In 140 characters!!”

“There’s a reason the ultra-solid armor using the van der Waals force created from supersonic molecular beams and ultra-low temperature isolated molecules isn’t more widely used: that can only exist far outside a human environment. If you bring the temperature down below -100 degrees, create a vacuum, and fill the space with helium, people will suffocate to death. The Wotan must only have Necleka onboard hooked up to a life support device. Everything else will be done by the Gungnir brain missiles and maintenance robots. That means it wasn’t a suitable standard for the current armies that still need flesh-and-blood infantry and maintenance soldiers.”

“What’s your point…?”

“You can’t tell? To maintain the extremely strong van der Waals force, the air inside has to be kept below -100 degrees. We don’t need to break the armor with an external force. If we can heat up the surface and get that heat to pass inside, the coolant will warm up and become useless. The molecules will lose their power to hold together, and the Wotan will fall apart on its own. It’s because they feared that that it has so much chaff and flares equipped.”

This weapon was supposedly meant to be destroyed to show it was a failure.

It had seemed like this monster would change history if it left the Northern Restricted Zone, but that was apparently not the case.

“So it looks unbeatable at first, but repeated blasts from an Object’s low-stability plasma cannon would heat it up and make it fall apart?”

“Yes.”

It was the perfect bluff.

It would show off a never-before-seen technology and then suffer utter defeat against an Object’s direct firepower, thus proving to the world how absolute and insurmountable the existing technology was. That was this weapon’s purpose.

But it was hardly surprising that Nancy Jolly-Roger felt a quiet anger at having one of her students forcibly placed on that piece of junk.

“However, we don’t have that kind of firepower. Can we really accomplish the same thing by firing missiles at it!?”

“They wouldn’t be afraid if it didn’t have a weakness. And I can see that fear in the design. I’ll return control of the FCS.”

A quiet sound filled the cockpit.

It was Nancy’s index finger tapping on a point on the LCD that shared information between the front and back seats.

“Right here. You already know how to guide it, don’t you?”

Mariydi Whitewitch ascended in her large twin-engine Zig-27 fighter. After taking up position behind the Wotan GEMCMB as it continually weaved left and right just off the ocean, she was ready to make the final attack.

“Ice Girl 1 to all. Here I go. Everyone, cover me.”

“Ice Sword 2. Understood, leader.”

“Attack Alpha.”

With that singsong announcement, Mariydi sent radar waves toward the 700m-wide target. She was targeting the protective cover for the cameras and radars on the very front.

“Attack Bravo. Attack Charlie.”

With the lock complete, she actually fired a missile. The Wotan released a ton of metal film in response. The storm of chaff blew toward her like flower petals and the AAM strayed off in the wrong direction.

“Ice Burn 4. Miss. Red target is still active!!”

“That’s fine.”

But Mariydi stayed behind the fleeing Wotan and continued emitting radar waves. She could see how much it disliked that.

(Are you gonna do it?)

It was obvious when looking down from above.

On the giant ray’s surface armor, a right and left row of vertical missile launch tubes opened like on a submarine. The Gungnir brain missiles showed themselves.

(Come on!!)

She would not let them fire.

In fact, that was Mariydi and Nancy’s entire goal here.

“Attack Alpha. Attack Bravo.”

She traced her thumb along the top of the control column.

And she pressed firmly down.

“Attack Charlie!!”

This time, she fired an AAM with the intention to hit.

She did not have to break the armor with the explosion. As long as the heat made it inside and warmed the ultra-cooled environment, she could defeat the impregnable Wotan. And unlike the Wotan, the Gungnirs did not seem to be protected by supersonic molecular beams, ultra-low temperature isolated molecules, or the van der Waals force. She had seen them break apart like normal when they crashed into the ocean or their mothership.

So if she could blow up the brain missiles in their launch tubes, the explosions

would spread inside the Wotan and the flames would heat the frigid air within.

“Chaff confirmed.”

The Wotan reacted to the AAM flying toward it while leaving behind a smoky trail. But the metal film chaff tended to flow back from the Wotan, so she did not have to worry about the storm swallowing up the AAM flying in from above.

Which meant…

“Now some flares. Damn, I guess I can’t follow all the details!!”

The ray-like Wotan must have decided the flares would have little effect because more than 100 balls of light erupted from its top surface like fireworks. The false heat sources were supposed to lead the missile astray.

There was a clear shift in the missile’s actions as if it were running along invisible rails.

And Mariydi did not continue observing it all.

She opened up her jet engines and flew toward the Wotan as if pursuing her own missile. She broke through the ocean of fireworks-like flares, adjusted her grip on the control column, and focused on her right index finger. The trigger-like fire button controlled the regular gun. It did not lock on, so it would be unaffected by the deception weapons.

“Attack gun!!”

She fired again and again.

As the Zig-27 flew along a straight line directly above, the 20mm machinegun bullets slammed into the Wotan like perforations and accurately attacked one line of launch tubes.

One explosion erupted after another.

The explosion of the brain missiles on the surface had likely also detonated the Gungnirs waiting below.

And as soon as Mariydi and Nancy flew past the Wotan, a dramatic change occurred.

The giant ray shape was cleanly cut away at the base and flowed backwards. Piece by piece crumbled away, it lost the power to remain afloat, and the entire

mothership contacted the ocean surface.

“Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. Attack Delta: Strike.”

“And hey!” shouted Mariydi. “Will that really be okay!?”

“It should,” answered Nancy. “As long as it maintains the angle of entry I calculated from the plans!!”

It was not smashed to pieces.

That may have been because it had been skimming across the ocean.

Even though it continued falling apart, the flat fuselage measuring more than 100 meters bounced a bit when it contacted the ocean surface. It was like a stone skipping on a river. Perhaps because it avoided too deep an angle, it gradually slowed down with each skip.

It was too strange a sight to call a landing or a crash landing.

And it did not last forever.

After decelerating a certain extent, the Wotan lacked the force to continue skipping and finally split the water’s surface and fully landed. If it had crashed like this while still supersonic, everything inside might have been smashed to pieces, but there was a chance of survival after slowing down this much. And it apparently lacked the ability to continue fighting. Mariydi slowly circled around the silenced Wotan and spoke into her radio.

“Use the source of this signal to send in a naval guard team. They have a single person to save. The wreckage is still floating, but they might need divers if that doesn’t last.”

“We can’t wait around that long. Eiyah!”

“Hey, wait, what was that silly voice fo-…!?”

Nancy apparently did not hear Mariydi’s protests.

The fried shrimp grabbed the ejection lever between her legs and yanked on it. The clear canopy protecting them was blasted away and flew backwards. Next, the 2 ejection seats shot upwards. Mariydi had no way of fighting it. The most she managed to do was snatch up her handheld music player.

“Ahh!?”

“Ice Sword 2. Leader…you’re definitely getting your pay docked for that.”

She had not had time to aim the Zig-27’s nose properly, so it vanished beyond the horizon while 2 parachutes blossomed like giant flowers in the cold Scandinavian sky.

“Your teacher is coming for you, Necleka! Wait…ah, ah, ahhhh!?”

The idiot was caught by a crosswind and fell into a different part of the dark ocean, but Mariydi grasped the reins properly and managed to land on a small island of composite armor floating in the ocean. She let go of the harness and cut away the parachute while raising her middle finger toward the ocean.

“That’s what you get!! That’s what you fucking get!! And our parachutes are made of fancy silk not synthetic fiber, so I hope it soaks up all the seawater and drags you down to a watery grave!! You idiot!! You dumbass!!”

“Ice Burn 4 to all. Is it just me or is leader mentally regressing?”

“Ice Horse 3. That’s actually about right for her age. It’s her usual behavior that’s messed up.”

No amount of shouting seemed to satisfy Mariydi, but then she saw something moving in the corner of her vision.

“…”

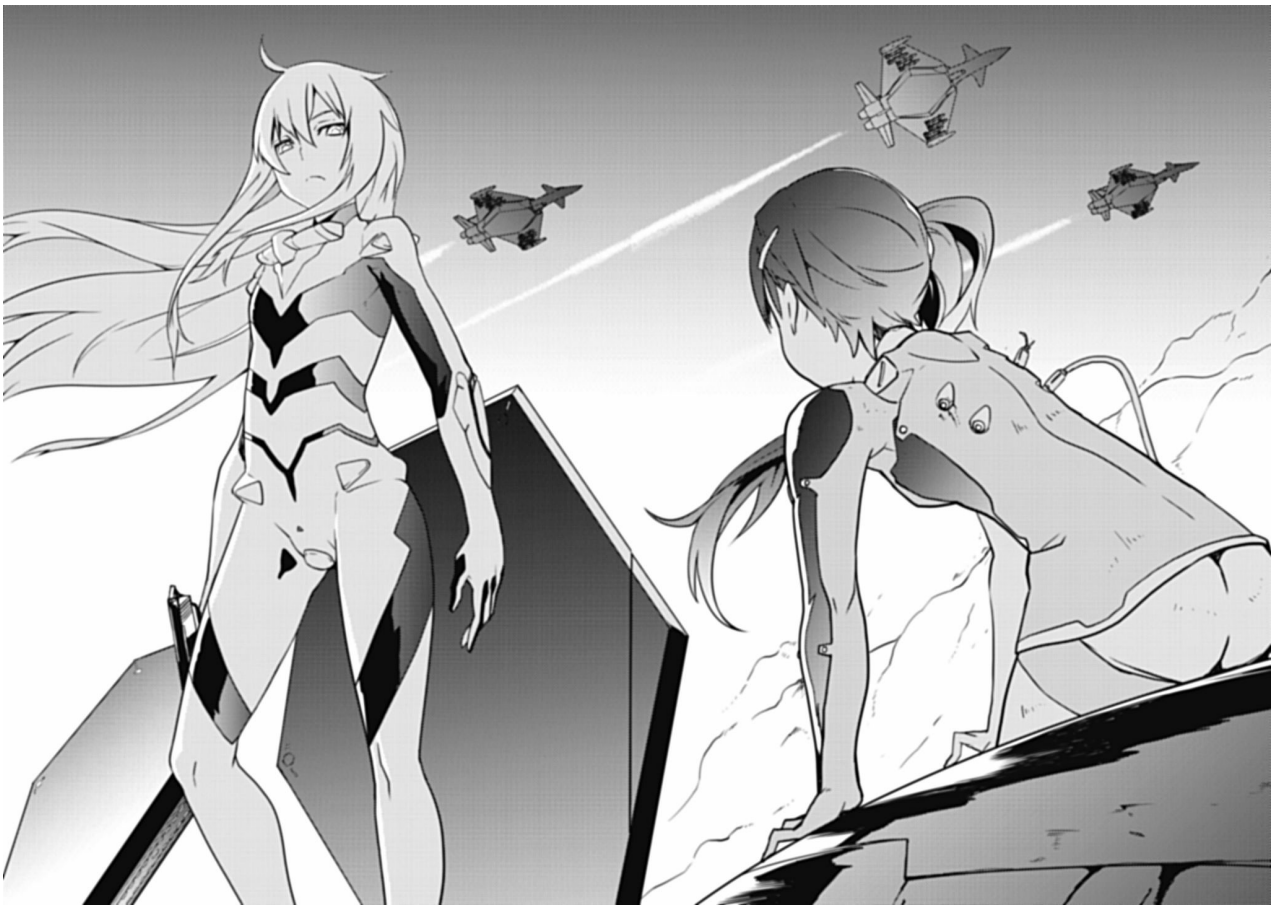
She quickly drew her handgun and aimed in that direction, but then she realized what it was.

A girl with a large side ponytail on the right side crawled out from a hatch. Perhaps for the life support device, she had electrodes attached to her, but she looked around with a blank look in her eyes.

“Are you Necleka Mojito?”

“…Who are you?”

“A bad girl.”



Mariydi Whitewitch sighed.

Even after seeing this result, the blonde girl remained unchanged. She would continue down her own path. And that path was the nightmarish one that Nancy Jolly-Roger had been so desperate to keep her students away from.

Her 3 wingmen flew by overhead.

And with a deadly weapon in hand, the obsolete ace pilot made a request.

“Let me hear the ultimate rock that surpasses even Blaze Mojito.”

Afterword

Heavy Object has reached its 13th volume.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

For the first time in a while, it was a Mariydi Whitewitch volume. The story was finally set in the all-out Northern Restricted Zone. By the way, this was not the unreleased volume I mentioned before, so try not to get them confused. This is the one area in this Object-focused world where the Objects aren't allowed, so what kind of distortions would develop there? And what kind of environment raised a special mercenary like Mariydi? But I couldn't just do the same thing as in Festival of Death, so I reversed the relationship in the second half and had Mariydi the one tossed around. This was a much more severe and merciless story than normal, but I hope you were able to enjoy a battle different from those of Quenser and Heivia.

Weapons come in many forms, but when thinking of beautiful weapons, fighter jets are always the first to come to mind for me. Perhaps my heart is attracted to that streamlined form. Aircraft should be the end result of eliminating all fun and seeking only logic and efficiency, but I'm always dizzied by the same sense of unreality as seeing a concept car with a companion girl at a motor show.

The enemies also had a lot of bizarre weapons, but I gave them a hint of giant weapons that actually existed. I think I made some fairly crazy choices with the combat train and ground effect machine. It was refreshing to use a bunch of things I couldn't with the usual Objects.

And the overall theme was what defines a success.

If you do to the other person exactly what they did to you, it might count as successful revenge, but if you haven't escaped the chain of violence, have you really broken the yoke and escaped that quagmire of an environment? When Cinderella or Snow White are first seen by the prince who appears out of nowhere like a deus ex machina, have they truly acquired freedom and happiness? The fairy tale heroines were suffering in the first place due to the rulers' poor ability to maintain order, so wasn't it kind of a fixed game from the beginning?

In the Heavy Object world, all of their problems are shoved off onto the twisted colossal weapons in the center of everything, and that gives them temporary peace. Of course, the Pilot Elites also have great value. Their social standing rises, they are richly rewarded, and they obtain a glamorous lifestyle and great status. …But does it really bring happiness to be dragged up onto the stage by the adults? I think posing questions like that is what makes side stories so much fun.

I gave this one the greatly ironic subtitle of Cinderella Story, but the other protagonist also has someone by his side known as a “princess”, doesn’t he?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Nagi Ryou-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. From the girls to the weapons and everything else, this story was completely reliant on Nagi Ryou-san. Thank you very much.

I also give my thanks to the readers. It was finally Mariydi and finally the Northern Restricted Zone. What did you think? I can only write characters with fundamentally different worldviews in the same series because of all of your support and that has given the entire series more depth. I hope you enjoyed it.

Now, I hope this book will remain in your heart in some way.

Oh Ho Ho and the Martini Series might good choices too?

-Kamachi Kazuma

Bonus Track (D.L. Sales Only): Over the Ragnarok

The Wotan GEMCMB, prized weapon of the villains plotting within the Northern Restricted Zone, had been destroyed and the girl contained inside, Necleka Mojito, had been rescued. At first glance, that was a happy ending with no loose ends, but wasn't that forgetting something?

Mike Nightcap of the Legitimacy Kingdom.

Recess Bloodhound of the Information Alliance.

Hayato Blackrose of the Capitalist Corporations.

Uver Derbyfizz of the Faith Organization.

…What had ultimately happened to the 4 villains who had caused the problem in the first place? They had hidden in the shadows of history using gaudy victories as distractions, and that meant having their decoy destroyed also meant they had won their own safety.

They were in a desert that could have been anywhere and looked nothing like a Scandinavian fjord. With a clear view to the horizon in every direction, a parasol stood from the sand, a table and chairs were prepared, tea and teacakes were laid out, and they elegantly held the following conversation:

"No matter what anyone does, history will not change. The Northern Restricted Zone is still divided by invisible lines, daily bombings and shellings tear into the people's hearts, and children who will respond well to the special tuning we require will be naturally produced in great numbers. Our business shall continue."

"What do you mean history will not change? Because we couldn't wipe clean the suspicion, we might not have a place in the military any longer. I was directly named in that video. This is all because we panicked and sent out the Einherjar rabies molecular motors."

"Suspicion is all it will be. This will not go to court. As always, any case will be thrown out due to insufficient evidence, but the reason will never be made public. This is why we have a thick human barrier of lawyers, remember?"

"Really? Instead of worrying about military promotion, I announced my honorable

retirement and hid in the shadows. I installed a young figurehead to take my place. I've always thought that the greatest privilege is to be able to erase your very existence. Because that means to wholly abandon all responsibility."

They would not have taken the risk of meeting directly if it was just to discuss this. Since they were here, they knew full well how to protect themselves and their immoral goings-on.

There was a single topic at hand.

"But we never did settle things with the Divided City of Valhalla. Or rather, with the children who escaped the Sacred Forest. We cannot allow that social experiment to leak outside the Northern Restricted Zone. Our world powers must remain mortal foes who constantly work to destroy each other."

"Yes, every one of the foolish masses gets a vote. When you get down to it, the winner in a democracy is whoever brings the idiots to their side. Courting the intellectual minority will get you nowhere. To them, the soldiers of an enemy nation are monsters, demons, and cannibal beasts. Heh heh. They must not know we can join forces over common interests like we do."

"Let's pursue those children. But making a direct order now would be a bad idea. Everyone from the prosecutors to the paparazzi is watching things like a hawk. As usual, we can leave the unofficial missions to the terrorists in the cities."

"So as always, we will be providing them with plenty of cash even though they don't quite know why."

Nothing changed.

The world did not change at all.

"Heh…heh heh."

"Pff…ah ha ha."

"Hah hah hah hah hah hah!!"

"Keh heh. Hee hee hee. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

Their laughter began quiet. It did not matter which of the 4 it came from. But it eventually infected them all, grew louder, and roared like they had breathed in some kind of gas. At this point, they could freely express their malice. No one could stop them. And so the 4 villains demonstrated their sinister "power" to the

world.

“Ha ha ha

publish gore pics of some fat old men and women."

…The battlefield cameraman sighed as he realized that some people were just bringers of bad luck.

Heavy Object - Volume 13
Northern Restricted Zone Cinderella Story
— *Girl's Fight At An Altitude Of 10,000m*

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